

Starbuck Valley Winter

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by

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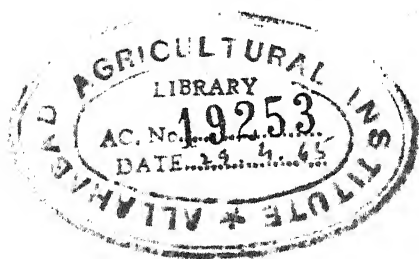


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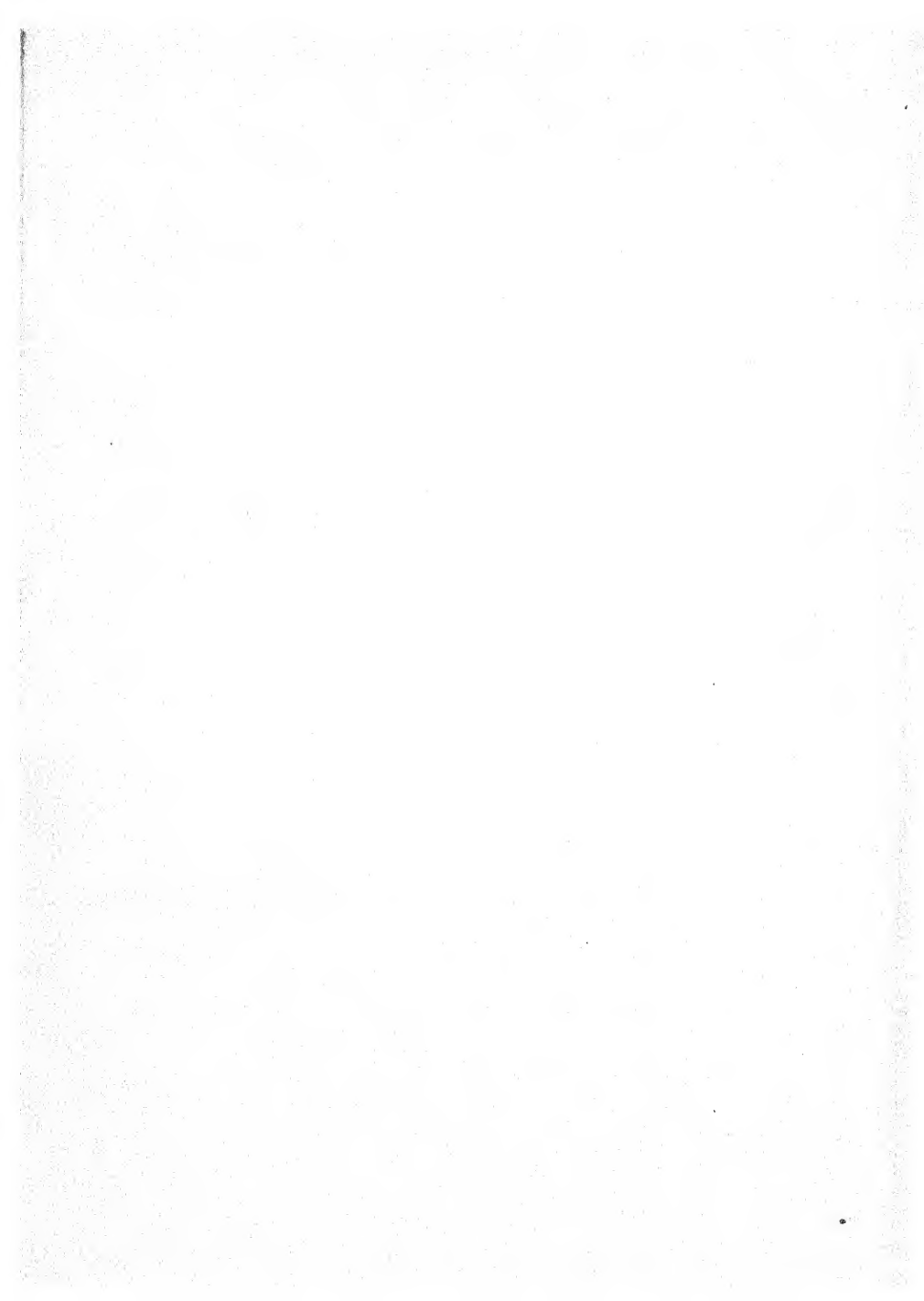
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Starbuck Valley Winter





Chapter I

YOUNG DON MORGAN LAY WITH HIS BACK AGAINST THE roots of a big alder tree, looking out at the quick, broken flow of the Starbuck River. A long-handled, four-pronged digging fork was on the ground beside him and just back of where he lay was the dark-soiled clearing in the alders where he had been digging spuds since morning. Watching the river, his mind was busy with a sudden inspiration. There it was, all that water going past, right past the farm, twenty-four hours a day, year in, year out, and there was, as they had said a thousand times, no way of getting it up on to the land—no way that they could afford, anyhow. But the house was something else again. Now they pumped water by hand from the well outside the back door. Don's sudden inspiration showed him the river pumping its own water, not enough to irrigate the pastures perhaps, but enough for the house. The flow of water to turn a wheel and the wheel's movement used to drive the pump—even that old hand pump at the back door. It wasn't clear in his mind yet, but he knew he could work it out; it was a wonder Uncle Joe hadn't

thought of it years ago, except Uncle Joe wasn't the mechanical kind.

But even the new thought didn't make Don altogether happy. He wasn't exactly miserable—he hadn't any real reason for being miserable and he had several good reasons for being happy—but he had so darn much figuring to do that for the moment the world seemed just too big to cope with. Everything was going on at once and nothing was happening, and from somewhere in the revolving, oppressive mix-up he had to find what he was going to do during the winter. What he decided would later have its turn in deciding what he would do and how he would do it next spring, when the fishing started up again.

He gave up watching the river and turned over on his stomach to think harder about his problems. The worst of them all, he told himself, was being sixteen instead of eighteen or twenty. When you were sixteen it seemed you weren't old enough to do anything you wanted to do, even though you were old enough to have quit school. Back in June, when it was almost time to quit school, it had seemed as though that would put everything right. And the summer, trolling for salmon with the little *Osprey*, had been fine. But now it was late September; the fishing was over and everything was mixed up. Aunt Maud said a young boy just starting out hadn't ought to be loose on his own, he ought to go down to Bluff Harbor and get himself a steady job at the sawmill. Uncle Joe hadn't said much, but you had to figure he'd pull with Aunt Maud; and

likely too he'd be glad of help about the place, and if Uncle Joe wanted help he had it coming.

Don had decided for himself a good long time ago that he didn't want to go to work in the sawmill. Most of the kids went in there, right away after leaving school, and they stayed there. Some of them got ahead too, but that didn't mean it was the only way a guy could get ahead. Guys like Art Hedley and Red Eliot and Jerry Temple got ahead, trolling for salmon with their big boats. And Steve Hardy, with his trap-line and his mining claims, in a different kind of a way. And even Uncle Joe had got ahead with his stump ranch. There was something different about men like that, and they seemed more important than men like Bill Staple, the yard boss down at the mill, or Buck Hansen, the head sawyer, or even, maybe, Mr. Ross, the superintendent. It was being your own boss made the difference, making up your own mind about what work you'd do and how you'd go about it.

Don jumped suddenly to his feet and picked up the fork. The dirt of the clearing was uneven and freshly black where he had been digging, and full sacks of potatoes stood in line along the fence at the end of the rows. There were still two rows to dig and Uncle Joe would be along with the team pretty soon; he wouldn't expect the job to be finished and it would be good to see him surprised and pleased over it. Don began to dig the hills quickly and expertly, lifting the potatoes to the surface of the ground through the loose soil and leaving them exposed behind him, each group like a

scattered nest of big eggs. He thought again of being sixteen instead of a full-grown man. Being sixteen meant you had to have someone go with you when you went hunting. It meant Aunt Maud could say you were too young to be talking about buying a boat like the *Mallard*—it was plain foolishness, she said; once give a boy a boat and you could call him a tramp for the rest of his life. Worst of all, right now anyway, being sixteen meant you couldn't go to the game warden and register a trap-line and take out a trapping license. That was what knocked the whole set-up cockeyed. Ever since that day back in July when Don had gone through to Starbuck Lake to see Fred Hardy, the trap-line idea had been in his mind. It seemed to solve everything; instead of a job in the sawmill it would mean a winter in the woods; instead of a batch of monthly paychecks that couldn't possibly add up to the price of the *Mallard* by the time fishing started, it meant any possibility you liked to think of, from losing your grubstake to the price of two boats like the *Mallard*. Best of all it meant being free in the Starbuck country instead of tied down to a millyard under a boss.

Without pausing even to straighten his back Don started on the second row of potatoes. Back in the summer it had seemed that the biggest thing between wanting to go trapping and going would be getting a grubstake together. But the *Osprey* had done that for him—the *Osprey* and a big run of coho salmon. Now it seemed that just having a grubstake and wanting to

go trapping wasn't enough—if you weren't a whole lot older than sixteen. What it all depended on was Uncle Joe; and Uncle Joe generally went along pretty much the way Aunt Maud said, whatever he might be thinking to himself.

Don heard the team coming along the wagon road as he finished the last row and began to sack the potatoes. Uncle Joe was singing and the wagon was creaking and the hooves of the team made soft sounds on the dry earth. Uncle Joe was feeling good—but then he generally was; Uncle Joe liked his farm and the Starbuck country and the color of the maple trees in the fall and the black leaf-mold of his new clearings in the alders. That was right and sensible too, Don conceded; those were all good enough things to like, kind of slow and quiet maybe, but still good. Steve Hardy said Uncle Joe was a philosopher, kind of wise and deep he meant, and not easily put out about anything. And Art Hedley said the same thing a different way. Art had said: "That uncle of yours now, there's what I reckon is a real happy man. There ain't anything he don't get a kick out of, and I mean a kick." Just the same, Uncle Joe had to stay close to home and and it did seem sometimes he had his worries with Aunt Maud.

The team swung into the clearing, heads moving to their steady, even step and Uncle Joe still singing behind them. He was a small, spare man, with a full, red face and dark eyes—it was his face, Don thought, that made him seem always so calm and his eyes that made



sure he never missed anything or failed to get the most out of it. As he came into the clearing now those eyes took in every detail of the work done and shone with pleasure and a sort of nodding approval.

"Ye've done fine, Don boy," Uncle Joe's voice was surprisingly full and big for such a small man. "I never thought ye'd get them more than half dug today." He hitched the reins on the wagon beside him and jumped down.

"It was good and dry," Don said. "And they're good spuds to dig—big and smooth so they come up on the fork instead of slipping through."

Uncle Joe picked up two potatoes from a hill and rubbed the balls of his thumbs hard over their smooth skins. Then he looked up from them and counted the sacks along the picket fence. "It's a good crop, sure enough, and the ground's cleaned up real good too." He sat down on one of the sacks and began to fill his pipe, looking about him at the clearing. Beyond the picket fence on the side away from the river another full acre of alder was slashed, brown leaves still on the branches and bark turning to dull purple on the dry wood. He pointed towards it. "That will grow spuds next year, and we ought to be able to slash from here clear up to the edge of the pasture." He shook his head solemnly. "It's a wonderful thing to see clear land coming out of the bush," he said. "That's a big purpose for a man to have."

Don thought: Maybe it is, if you look at it that way. But growing stuff is a slow, hard way to make money,

and being tied to one place all your life may be all right for old folks, but it isn't what I'd want. "Will you have to use powder for the stumps?" he asked hopefully.

"A stick here and there maybe to split the big ones. But the team ought to move most of them, with the blocks. Should let them rot for a season, but that's too slow." His bright eyes watched Don closely. "Reckon maybe you figure all farming's kind of slow, boy? A few sticks of powder might be a good thing to liven the old place up?"

Don laughed. "Guess there was something like that in back of my mind. It isn't altogether I don't like to work around the farm, but there's other things I like too—fishing, for instance."

"That's fair enough. Maybe it is time we burned some powder around here, at that. Here's two full weeks of deer season gone and Ma ain't had a saddle steak in the pan yet. It's all part of a bush farmer's work to go get himself meat once in a while."

"I was thinking that too."

"You got one tied up some place? From now on you're elected to do most of the hunting for the family. I ain't got the time to go out the way I used."

"You mean I can hunt alone?"

"Sure. Why not? You're big and strong enough to pack a buck, and even last season you could find them and shoot them good as I could. Game warden won't say nothing so long as you keep back in this country;

I was talking to him down at the Harbor a couple of weeks ago."

"Gee, that's swell, Uncle Joe. Thanks a lot." He thought quickly about the trapping, whether to say something now, where it fitted, or wait till he knew more about it. He knew he must wait; Uncle Joe was easy-going, but he could get impatient if you started talking when you didn't know just what you wanted and how you would go about it. He always said a man had no excuse for not figuring some before he talked.

"You better hunt tomorrow," Uncle Joe said.

"How about them carrots? You said they needed digging before it came to rain again."

"They'll keep where they are a while yet. We make life too darn grim sometimes, Don, always fretting about piling in an extra dollar, worrying about rain on the hay crop or frost on the spuds or them hopping beetles on the turnips or some such pest. Just so a man works the best he knows how, he'll get his share. You got some of that worrying strain that's in your aunt, and I can't see how it come with you not blood-related anyway. Your Dad didn't have it no more than me—not so much."

Don laughed. "Aunt Maud don't reckon I do enough worrying. She was on at me all summer to quit fishing and go to work at the mill, and now she's more set on it than ever."

"I know." Uncle Joe stood up. "Let's get them spuds loaded. We can talk while we're at it."

Swinging the full sacks up on to the wagon, Don

felt good. The strength of his arms and back pleased him—last year it had been all he could do to heave a hundred pounds on to the tail of the wagon, but now it was almost easy. And tomorrow he would be hunting, alone. Not just for grouse or ducks, but for deer, and not just tomorrow but whenever the family needed meat. It was good that it had come without having to ask for it, sort of grown out of what he had learned for himself and what he could do, the same way as Uncle Joe saying he could take the *Osprey* and go fishing, back at the start of the summer. It made a way better chance that the other thing would work out too.

"Uncle Joe," he said. "Do you reckon a man has to go work for wages to get any place?"

Joe Morgan picked up the lines and eased the team forward a few feet before he answered. "Depends on the man and what kind of place he wants to get. A man can do good working for wages and if he starts in young and stays at one kind of work he can get ahead fine. But there's other men always got some idea working in their heads—your Dad was like that—and they won't stay still any place long."

"Dad was working for wages in the mine when he got killed." It was an old hurt now, three years old and no longer hard to talk about.

"Sure he was and staying right with it too so he could make a grubstake to go back in the hills and hunt rocks. He knew where he wanted to go, too, and what he'd do when he got there. That's what I was trying to tell your aunt about the fishing. Some men

turn into bums when they get to fishing, but plenty make good at it too."

"You mean the ones that have got some plan in back of their heads all the time and go right out and work at it? Like Art Hedley and the rest of them?"

"That's right. Those men aren't bums, but your aunt can't see it that way. Your Dad wasn't any bum, but she never was sure about that either. The way I see it you're kind of like your Dad; you got ideas and you'll make good working for yourself just as sure as you would working for wages—and be a whole lot happier too."

Dan felt growing inside him the queer pleased laugh that always came after praise that really meant something. He choked it back because it interfered with his voice and made whatever he said sound sort of foolish. "I'd sooner be my own boss," he said. "But that don't mean I don't want to work. A fisherman has got to work to get him a good boat and go out where there's real fishing."

Joe Morgan watched him, his dark eyes bright and his face calm. Don slung up the last two sacks and went over towards the gateway of the clearing. He's a real husky kid, Joe thought, growed right out of himself since he came up here from the States. He's a nice-looking kid too, with that tow head and the big mouth and gray eyes; it's no wonder he's a hunter, with eyes like that—they look the same way that sergeant's did in France, the one they used to say could shoot the buttons off a small Heinie at a thousand yards.

Don put the bars up behind the wagon, then jumped up on to the load. He lay back on the full sacks, feeling the rumble and jolt of the wheels through them against his back, looking up at the sky between the branches of the alders. September was a good month on the coast, perhaps the best of all in many ways, with the maples turning and the blue grouse and deer thick in the open logging works. This year he had missed most of it, fishing the late run of cohoes, but sometimes the fine September days held on into October and perhaps they would this year. Tomorrow would be fine anyway and he would be hunting. If things went well and he killed his buck early there might be time to go on through to Starbuck Lake and see Steve Hardy. Seeing Steve was the only possible way of finding out enough about the chances of a trap-line to put the thing up to Uncle Joe properly.

He smelt woodsmoke, sharp and strong on the air. Then the sky was suddenly open above him and they came out to where Joe Morgan had been burning slashed alder at the edge of the pasture. Don sat up, then jumped down and ran ahead to take down the bars into the pasture. When the wagon had passed through and the bars were in place again he climbed on to the seat beside his uncle. Ahead of them, over the backs of the team, the pasture stretched level and green to Joe Morgan's house. Joe Morgan checked the team as they started up at the sound of Don's climbing aboard, and sat looking at it. The clearing was a big one for that country, running a quarter of a mile or

more up along the river and three or four hundred yards from the river bank to the base of the dark timbered slope that bounded the flat on the side away from the river. A few great Douglas fir stumps still stood, charred and black in obstinate bulk that would yield only gradually to the succession of spring and fall fires; a picket fence made a corral at the back of the barn and there was another protecting the garden around the house, and wire fences dividing the pasture. It's a good sweep of clear land, Joe Morgan thought—for this country anyway.

"What are we waiting for?" Don asked.

"It don't do any harm to stop and look once in a while. Look so you really see something."

Don looked. The black and white Holsteins were waiting up by the gate of the Hemlock pasture, ready to move to the barn for milking. The barn was gray and tall and big-looking, with hay bursting through the door of the loft left open since haying time. The house stood away from it, towards the river, the shadow of a big maple tree falling across the long slope of the shake roof and curtained windows looking out from yellow walls. There was a light breeze down the river, Don saw, carrying blue alder smoke away from the tall stove-pipe. He looked beyond the house, seeing the bend of the river above it and the pasture meeting the edge of the woods and the hill on the far side climbing above the alders and crab apples of the island into heavy green of hemlock and fir and cedar. He felt a sudden excitement as he let his mind see beyond this, on up the river to the logged-off land, across that to Starbuck

Lake, beyond the lake and into the far hills. But he said: "Looks about the same to me."

Joe Morgan laughed contentedly. "Sure it does. Looks about the same and maybe always will. But that don't mean you can't see something in it you haven't seen before. Harder you look the more you see and it's the cheapest pleasure a man can have—seeing."

At the house Aunt Maud was waiting for them. She clattered the milk buckets out on to the back step. "It's late, Joe," she said. "Supper'll be on soon as you're through."

Looking past her Don could see his cousin at the stove. Ellen was good, for a girl; she didn't fuss at you much and she was pretty and she sure could cook. It would be good tonight he knew, because they were killing off the old hens as the pullets came on to lay and Ellen had a way of cooking them so they seemed like roasted, only more tender than old hens ought to be if you roasted them. And there would be mashed potatoes and mashed turnips, bright yellow with lots of butter, and thick brown gravy with bits of chicken liver and gizzard in it. And afterwards some kind of fruit that Aunt Maud and Ellen had put up during the summer—blackberries maybe, or peaches. One thing about Aunt Maud, she saw to it you ate good and everything was right about the house.

Milking was easy and quick in the quiet barn, with only the four big Holsteins and one of them almost dry. Afterwards, carrying the full pails back to the dairy, Don said: "I'll separate."

Joe Morgan nodded. "O.K. I'll fill the kitchen wood-box and pump the water. We'll be through then."

Don poured milk into the bowl of the separator and began to turn the handle, slowly at first then faster until the hum of the discs reached a steady, even pitch and it was time to let the milk down to them. As he kept turning he began to think again of going hunting. He could start early, hunt the round hill beyond the first ridge for the big buck that was nearly always there. If that was no good he could go on across Shifting River and try the deep gully where he had seen the four-point in blackberry season. A buck in either of those places would give him a good part of the day to go on through to Starbuck Lake and talk to Steve Hardy about going trapping.

He heard his uncle go into the kitchen and set the buckets of water down on the bench by the sink. Don poured the last of the milk into the separator bowl and reached for the handle again, then saw Ellen.

"You go get cleaned up," Ellen said. "Ma's minding the stove and supper's all ready."

"Uncle Joe get the wood?" Don asked.

"Sure. Dad's cleaning up already. He says you're to hurry—he's hungry."

Don started to go, then turned back. "Ellen," he said. "You know something?" She shook her head. "We ought to have running water in this house—you know, out of a faucet. I've been thinking today and there's no reason we couldn't have."



Chapter II

IT WAS STILL QUITE DARK WHEN DON CREPT DOWNSTAIRS and into the kitchen. He lit a lamp. Everything was laid out, as Ellen had said it would be, and he went about making a fire in the stove and cooking his breakfast. The kitchen was a big room and the kerosene lamp lighted it only dimly; but as the cedar kindling crackled in the stove his eye caught the gleam of his rifle barrel in the rack and he went quickly across the room and took it down. For the first time it felt really like his own gun, something he could use for his own purposes as he saw fit. He opened the breech quietly, closed it again and laid the rifle down on the table by the back door.

He was in a hurry to get started now. He poured milk into a saucepan on the stove, set the frying pan on and cracked two eggs into it. Then he cut four thick slices of bread and buttered them. In a little while he went back to the frying pan, shook pepper and salt on to the eggs and flipped them over face down in the pan. The milk was steaming and he poured some into a cup and drank it. It tasted warm and good and almost

persuaded him to go out with nothing more inside him. But he scooped the eggs from the pan and put them between the thick slices of bread, then folded one sandwich in paper and put it in his pocket. Holding the other in his hand he closed the draft on the stove and blew out the lamp. Still holding it, he crossed the dark kitchen, picked up his rifle, opened the door and went out.

Outside it was cold and misty, very faintly light. Biting into his sandwich, Don turned across the pasture, angling towards the river and the start of the trail at the edge of the timber. His eyes were used to the dim light now and he could see the shapes of the cattle against a tongue of mist that hung low on the far side of the pasture; along the line of the river the mist was heavy and solid, raised a little above the surface of the water and cut off twenty or thirty feet up so that the shape of the hill on the far side was clear and dark above it. Everything was still and quiet except for the steady roar of the river in the strong rapid above the bend, and Don's own movement was silent in spite of his swift striding. He finished the sandwich as he came to the edge of the timber, and he stopped there to put shells in the magazine of the rifle. He should have put them in before, as soon as he left the house, because there might have been a good buck in the pasture. But he had purposely not done so; he wanted to hunt today, to find one special buck and kill that one and no other. It would have been too dark, anyway, he told himself, to see properly in the pasture and any

buck feeding there would have been back towards the edge of the timber; the cattle raising their heads as he passed them would have been enough to give warning and spoil any chance of a shot.

From the edge of the timber the trail rose sharply to cross a hog-backed ridge, then ran along an easy slope above the river, among a stand of big firs and hemlocks. It was still almost dark in the timber, but Don knew the trail well and traveled it confidently, feeling the packed earth under the thin rubber soles of his running shoes. It was nearly three miles to the steep gully in the open logging works where he had marked down the big buck during the berry picking season, and he knew it would be full daylight before he got there. But there was a buck in the little swamp too, and that was on the flat above the trail, perhaps half a mile farther up the river. It was not such a good buck—the horns were smaller anyway, Don was sure—but getting him would make the rest of what he had to do, traveling through to Starbuck Lake to see Steve Hardy, much easier. And if the buck in the gully was not to be found he might have a long hunt to find anything at all. On the other hand, the sound of a shot in the swamp might reach back to the farmhouse; and if Aunt Maud heard it she would want to know why it had taken all day to get back with a buck killed so close to home first thing in the morning.

But when he came to the big, swell-butted hemlock that stood between two cedars and knew he was directly below the swamp, Don turned off the trail and

started up the hill. He moved silently and easily against the slope, bearing a little to the left to bring himself out to the edge of the swamp where the buck usually lay. It was not an easy place to come up on him; some way back from the swamp the timber opened up and let in light enough for a heavy growth of salal brush that rustled to the least touch on that silent morning. A ring of twisted, arching crab apple trees grew all around the edge of the wet ground, forcing Don to duck his head and stoop and crouch to pass among them; there was light enough in the swamp for him to see the little hump of dry ground where the buck had his bed, but he could not keep his eyes steadily on the open ground in front of it and the thick brush that grew down to it on one side. He came through the crab apples and out on to the dry brown rushes of the floor of the swamp, then stood straight and still for a moment, his rifle ready. The buck had not gone out, he was almost sure—there had been no rustle of brush, no soft movement of furtive escape, no sudden bounding flight. If he was still in there it would be a sure shot now. Quietly Don moved forward, his heart beating faster, the rifle quivering a little in his ready hands. He came to the hummock, then slung the rifle back to the crook of his left arm and stepped boldly up on to the rising ground. The buck's bed was on the very highest part of it, a rust-red circle of rotten wood, trampled flat and smooth; from it he could look out upon the open ground of the swamp or creep back to safety through the heavy salal that grew right down

from the timber to the bed. Don stooped down and laid his hand flat on the soft, powdery wood; it was quite cold—the buck had not been near it for at least several hours. Don thought: I might have known it. There's something about that darn old buck; he's the kind that creeps out to feed just about dusk and lies up good and quiet all day. I'll bet he's got other beds than this, too; maybe he uses this most of the time, but he's not the dumb kind that you can reckon on. He bent closer to the ground and examined the single clear imprint of a hoof near the edge of the bed; it was deep and long and the hoof was broadly split and blunt-toed. Could be he's bigger than I thought, Don decided; I'm kind of glad I checked up on him—one like that is worth watching.

He turned away from the swamp and went back down to the trail again. It was quite light now, even in the heavy timber, and he looked about him as he walked, searching the hillside above and below the trail. Once he saw a single doe, creeping down from him towards the river. He stopped and whistled, so that she raised her head and looked back at him. Don put up his rifle and sighted on her neck to test his own steadiness, then lowered it and went on. He knew that it was one thing to hold the sights steadily on an animal when you do not mean to shoot, something else again to be steady and sure when the buck you want is looking back at you or bounding away along a hillside. That was a test that had to come and Don wanted it to work out right for him. Some men could shoot,

some couldn't. Some could shoot well at a target and yet failed always on game. Some were sure and natural and easy on game, yet could make only the poorest showing on a target. It's in a guy's make-up, some way, Don thought; Uncle Joe now, he can shoot pretty good most anyway, but you couldn't reckon him a sure shot the way he says Dad used to be. And he ain't like they say Steve Hardy is, quick as a flash and sure every time whether it's a running or a standing shot. That's the way I'd like to be, but I guess it's a gift—you've got to be born with it.

A little over two miles from the farm the trail crossed Shifting River, a few hundred yards above its junction with the Starbuck. Don stopped for a moment on the crossing log, looking down into a shallow pool where the migrating salmon were already collected—humpbacks, cohoes and even a few early dog salmon, and behind them cutthroat trout, dark and small against the gravel. Most of the salmon lay quietly, but from time to time a fish would move restlessly and circle the pool. As Don turned to go on a big male coho, already hook-nosed and with scarlet sides, drove suddenly forward and jumped clear out below the crossing log, splashing water against Don's legs. Don laughed, thinking of the fish that had splashed him as he drew them alongside the *Osprey* in the fishing season. It seemed suddenly strange to him that they should be in that little transparent pool when only a few weeks earlier they had ranged through water a hundred fathoms deep. Out there a fish that fought free of the hook

was lost forever in a single green flash of his side; here in the pool every move he made was exposed and confined.

Once past the Shifting River Don really began to hunt. There was a light breeze across the Starbuck, drawing up the Shifting Valley, and he knew it would hold that way for at least as far up as the entrance of the canyon on the main river. He swung away from the Starbuck, following close to the Shifting River for fully a quarter of a mile, then changed back to his old direction again, climbing the steep slope of a low ridge. On the crest of the ridge, he was suddenly clear of the timber, looking out across several miles of logged and burned country to a distant line of bluffs. A narrow strip of timber, beyond the reach of the logging railroads, marked the line of the Starbuck. Between that and the ridge on which Don stood the country was heaved and broken into a chaos of steep-sided gullies. Don looked towards these, sorting them out in his mind, trying to find a way around and down to the one in which his buck would be lying. He had to circle behind them, downwind; then it would be better to work across almost to the Starbuck again and come to the gully at its mouth, so that the buck would be forced from the thick cover on to the open slopes.

As Don worked his way up and down the steep sides of the patternless gullies he kept his rifle ready, right hand gripping the stock, the carbine barrel resting in the bend of his left arm. Behind him the sun was well up in a cloudless sky and the mist had melted away

from its light; but the narrow floor of each gully, with its dry or flowing creek bed, was still dark and held something of the cold touch of early morning. Once a buck started in front of him. Don stopped instantly, the rifle halfway to his shoulder. But he could see the horns, two points on each, and the buck he was hunting had four; he lowered the rifle slowly, watching the bounding flight of the buck and the repeated white flash of its tail. He saw it stop on the crest of the ridge that made the side of the gully and held his breath hard for fear it would turn down towards the Starbuck and disturb the buck he wanted. It stood there almost quietly, hind legs a little bent, ready to spring, for two or three slow minutes. Then Don moved and it started forward again, swinging to the right, towards the river. I could have stayed still, Don thought, and maybe he would have gone the other way. And maybe he wouldn't. I should have shot and then it wouldn't have mattered about the other one.

But he knew it would have mattered. He went on, following the deer trail up the side of the gully to the fork on the ridge, then he held to the left, down into another gully, out of that and down into yet another. As he came up out of this third one he crossed a deer trail, worn deeply into the soft earth. He turned along it, walking slowly, looking carefully down at the fresh tracks that marked it. In a little while he saw what he wanted, a spreading track, wide and long and blunt, more deeply cut than any of the others. The big buck had gone down that way. Unless something had dis-

turbed him he should be still on his bed among the thick willow and salmonberry.

Don traveled straight on for two or three hundred yards more, then turned towards the Starbuck again. Excitement was growing in him now and he felt breathless and shaky. Down near the river again he stopped and tried to steady himself, but he wanted too badly to go on, to try out this thing that was now only a few moments away from him. As he came to the mouth of the gully he was breathing almost easily again, but his mouth and throat were dry and his hands felt weak; even his eyes seemed less clear than they should be and he blinked several times and focussed them sharply on different objects about him, to try them. He began to work up the right side of the gully, stepping silently, watching the trails on the far side, his rifle ready.

Halfway up the gully Don stopped. This was about where he had been that time back in the summer. The buck had come out then with a sudden crash, angling sharply up the side of the gully on which he stood. He put his hand down to the lever of his rifle to pump in a shell. As he did so a gray shape slipped silently from the thick growth below him and began to climb the far side of the gully. Don pumped in the shell and the rattle of the breech mechanism started the buck into bounding flight. Don whistled sharply once, twice, three times; at the third whistle, almost on the crest of the ridge, the buck stopped. He was at a difficult angle, his body three-quarters turned away, but looking back. Don found the rifle at his shoulder, sights lined on the



Once a buck started in front of him

narrow strip of neck that showed between the buck's side and his head. He fired, saw the buck start into sudden rigidity, then collapse; the big body rolled over twice on the slope and wedged against a stump.

Don was already leaping down the slope on his own side of the gully. He was excited and shaken now in a way that he had not had time to be before the shot. He wanted to get up to the buck and be sure that the bullet had done its work properly, that it had entered the neck cleanly, without plowing along the side of the body and spoiling meat. Fighting through the thicket of alder and heavy brush in the bottom of the draw he found a sudden new fear—that the buck might be only stunned or slightly wounded and that he would get up and go on. But he came to the far side of the draw and saw the bulk of him still against the stump. He climbed the slope quickly, seized the heavy horns and turned the head to find the clean mark of the bullet squarely in the center of the neck. He took out his knife and, kneeling, made the deep cut from the base of the ribs clear up to the brisket to bleed the meat. Only then did he sit down on the slope and let himself realize his triumph.

Less than three years earlier Don had been a city boy. His father, Uncle Joe's brother, had been a prospector and miner, but in the years since Don had first gone to school he had been mostly miner, working steadily in one mine or another in eastern Washington because there was too little certain return in prospecting to support a wife and child. So Don's first

thought now was of the boys at the school in the last mining town he had lived in. Gee, he thought, if those kids could have seen that! But the thought didn't satisfy him. They couldn't have understood it properly. If Uncle Joe could have seen it now, or Dad; they would have known what it meant. It didn't even need them really; it had all been so slick and smooth, so exactly the way he had meant it to be from 'way back in the summer that time.

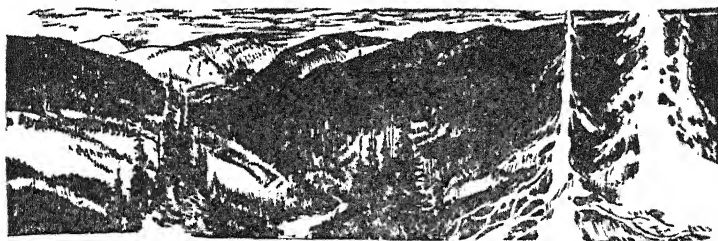
Don glanced up at the sun and knew he must keep moving to do everything he had to do that day. He went back to the buck and began to cut out the entrails, working slowly and carefully to make a clean job. As he worked he thought again of the kids at the mining town school. They were a good bunch of kids and the things he had done there had been a whole lot of fun—playing baseball, for instance, and making second base on the big team when Gus Enderby tried to say he was too small; running down the center of the street, throwing a tightly rolled newspaper up on to the front porch of each house; riding a bicycle over the narrow, unguarded plank walks at the mine. But none of that came up to this. When the cave-in at the mine had killed his father and Uncle Joe had written that he was to come up to Canada, he had told the kids he would be hunting and trapping up there—he hadn't mentioned the farm at all. And now it was really working out that way; last summer the fishing, with a real commercial license and a gas boat and making good at it. Now hunting—real hunting, on his own and to get meat for

the family. And perhaps the trapping too, within a few weeks now; if he could find Steve Hardy up at the lake he would have a pretty good idea, one way or another, before night.

When the buck was clean he slit the hind legs between bone and sinew above the hocks, then drew the forelegs back through these slits, cutting the knee joint and skinning out part of the shin-bone. This joining of forelegs to hind legs made two secure shoulder straps by which he could carry the buck, and once again Don felt he was facing a test. The buck was bigger than any other he had tried to pack—at least a hundred and fifty pounds, he judged. He took hold of the head and one foreleg and dragged it away from the stump. Then he sat down on the slope just below it and put his arms through the joined legs, so that the strips of hide joining shin-bone to knee came on to his shoulders. He tried to stand up and could not. He tried again, shifting position so that the weight of the buck came more squarely on his back; leaning well forward, lifting slowly, he made it. His knees felt weak under him, but he moved cautiously, reaching for his rifle. As he turned round the weight of the buck shifted, almost throwing him over and rolling him down the slope, but he regained his balance somehow and began to climb to the crest of the ridge.

Once he was up on the ridge he knew he could do it easily. His body was already used to the shifting, awkward weight and his knees and legs felt strong

again. He went down along the ridge to the mouth of the draw and from there to the trail in the narrow strip of timber along the river. He cached his buck under a fallen tree near the trail, then started out at once for Starbuck Lake.



Chapter III

THE TRAIL FOLLOWED THE RIVER FOR PERHAPS HALF A mile above where Don left his buck, then swung away across the logged land towards the line of bluffs behind which lay Starbuck Lake and Steve Hardy's cabin. It was hot in the open, with a strong September sun high in a clear sky, but Don made good time. Most of the way was along old logging grades, lined with young alders pushing up through the gravel ballast that had once held the ties in place, and he walked steadily, without stopping to rest. Don was a well-grown boy for his age, fairly tall, wide shouldered and long-legged. He walked with a quick, careless stride that seemed loose and untidy, but it set his running shoes solid and straight on the uneven gravel of the logging roads and swung his body smoothly forward from stride to stride with a spring and drive that cost him little effort. He was lightly dressed—a pair of tattered blue jeans held up by heavy suspenders, and a blue cotton work shirt, pale and faded from Aunt Maud's vigorous washings. An old, dull-red rain hat, pushed back on his head, showed his thick, sun-bleached hair and a full, square

face burned reddish brown to hide a few scattered freckles. His eyes were a sharp clear gray that made the pupils seem very small and black; and they never rested, watching about him this way and that, always finding something to hold their quick interest.

Several times as he passed along the grades blue grouse or ruffed grouse started on quick wings ahead of him. Don watched their flight, following it carefully to mark their pitch, because the habit to do so was in him. But he made no move to turn after them and did not so much as break his stride when a whole covey of blues thundered up from underfoot and settled themselves nervously in the small trees all about him. Generally he would have stopped to stir them out of the trees or to see how close he could come to them before they would fly, but today he was in a hurry. He was not shooting grouse anyway, he told himself. The buck was back there by the trail and that was his hunting for the day. It was a lesson of Uncle Joe's, faithfully learned and many times tested, that a man should hunt one thing at a time only—"If you want a buck," Uncle Joe said, "take the rifle and three or four shells and go out after a buck. When you get him, quit hunting. If it's ducks or grouse you want, take the shotgun and go after them—if you cross a buck or a bear, or anything else short of maybe a cougar or a wolf, let him go. He's none of your business. There ain't either sense nor sport in blasting off shells at stuff you weren't looking for and don't need." That's right enough too, Don thought, a man goes out to do two things at once

and he comes back without doing either one. But the quick whirr of wings as another grouse flushed ahead of him made his hand start to the stock of his rifle. He smiled to himself. "Just the same," he said aloud. "It'd be kind of nice to have a shotgun along right now. It isn't every time you get so many chances out in the open like this."

He came to the end of the grades and started up the winding trail that led among the bluffs. Near the top he stopped for a moment and looked back over the country he had crossed. It was a great, spreading sweep of country, in many colors: red with the frost-touched dogwoods, yellow with the dying willow and poplar leaves, brown with dead bracken and bare gravelly earth, black where burnt stumps and snags stood all about it, golden again with the splendor of the maples. And on all sides it was bound by the dark green of heavy timber, dark green stretching away to the north from the line of the Starbuck, dark green in a narrow belt between the mouth of Shifting River and the sea, dark green again mounting the Shifting Valley and climbing away through fold upon fold until it became a soft and hazy blue on the distant hills. Don could see the tiny clearing of his uncle's farm among the alders of the river flat, and to the right of it, six or eight miles down along the coastline, the smoke of the sawmill. The Strait was a deep blue under the clear sky and beyond it the snow-slides on the mainland mountains stood out in sharp patterns where the summer's heat had eaten away at their edges. He looked back at the

logged land, searching for the fold of the gully where he had killed his buck. He could see a sparkle of blue and white at the log jam pool of the Starbuck, where he had made the big catch of trout last spring, and the scrub timber of the swamp where he had killed his first buck with Uncle Joe beside him. He had names of his own for most of the creeks and swamps he could see, and even for some of the logging roads. Standing there, looking out over it, he felt a sudden pride in the country, a sense of ownership through knowledge, through having set his feet upon so much of it in the three years he had lived there. He looked again at the deep-cut line of the Shifting Valley, starting south from the Starbuck and curving hard back to the west, far into the sharp, steep mountains that grew up out of the line of bluffs he was standing on. That's likely where Steve will say to go, he thought—if nobody else wants it.

From the bluffs it was only a short way down to Starbuck Lake. The trail began to drop almost at once, through standing timber again now, and in a little while he could see light on the water between the trees. He quickened his pace, suddenly afraid that Steve might be away from the cabin and his trip would be wasted. The trail rounded a shoulder of the draw and he came in sight of the cabin. There was no smoke from the stove pipe and no sign of life in the clearing. Don stopped sharply and stood quite still, listening. At first he could hear nothing; then, from a little way up along the lakeshore, came the slow, easy, whispering draw and thrust of a well-filed crosscut saw in a big fir log.

Don slipped on down the trail and out into the middle of the clearing, then stood still on the dry brown grass. Steve's canoe was at the edge of the lake, pulled up out of the water; two loons swam lazily along a little way out beyond it. The door of the cabin was open, but the smooth sound of the saw still came from along the trail that led up the lake from the clearing. Don turned and started towards it, glad to have come to the end of his journey, sure of his welcome.

As he came close to where Steve was working he slipped his hand to the lever of his rifle and threw open the breech. Then he called: "Hello, Steve."

The sawing stopped sharply. "Who's that?" A moment later Steve was standing on the trail. "Well, for gosh sake, if it isn't the young one. I never thought to see you up this way. I figured maybe it was Ray come back early."

Don wanted his visit to seem casual—it was good to look in and see a guy because you were passing, sort of easy and sensible. "I was up by the bluffs," he said. "Thought I might as well come through the trail and see how you guys are making it."

"You been hunting. Better come along to the shack and we'll fix something to eat."

"Why not finish what you're doing first?"

"Take a tidy piece to finish that; I'm cutting a winter's wood. Besides, it's time to eat and it ain't every day company drops in. Least we can do is treat 'em right."

Don followed Steve back to the cabin, watching the

old man's bent-kneed walk. He wondered how old Steve was; more than fifty, likely as much as sixty. He had been a cowboy once, back in the interior of British Columbia and had gone to the South African war with Strathcona's Horse. If he was twenty then he'd have to be somewhere close on sixty now. But he was active and strong still; his thin shoulders could carry a heavy pack and there was a spring in his bent-legged steps that carried him well.

The cabin was a pleasant place, far tidier and more comfortable than an ordinary trapper's shack. Wide windows looked out across the lake from the single big room and the cook-stove was solid and bright and heavy-looking. Clean tarpaulins covered the two bunks and two home-made armchairs had latticed rawhide arms and backs. Don tried to help start the fire, but Steve said again: "No, you're company—anyway till you've ate. I've got my own ways of doing things. You just set till she's all on."

So Don sat and looked about the cabin. It was lined with fine-grained cedar, split into wide red boards, and there were many cupboards, closely and carefully built of the same wood. There was a rack of yew wood on one wall, supporting three rifles and a shotgun, and in a corner stood two old fishing rods, rigged and ready. A prospector's pick hung on the wall near the rifle rack and across on the opposite wall there were two pairs of snowshoes. Making conversation, Don said: "Sure must have been a pile of work, splitting out all that cedar."

Busy at a table near the stove, Steve said: "A man ain't got too much else to do, living alone. There's times he's glad of a slow, finicking job to keep his hands busy." He pushed open a door and went out into the woodshed. "Guess you can get away with three little saddle steaks. There ain't much else that's fit to eat and quick to get."

"I wouldn't want anything better."

Steve came back with the steaks, pounded each one thoroughly, dipped it in flour and dropped it into the hot frying pan. "Won't be long now," he said, reaching for the coffee can. "How's fishing?"

"Pretty near over. I did pretty good last month."

"What'll it be this winter? Back to the farm?"

"Aunt Maud reckons I ought to look for work down at the sawmill."

Steve measured out coffee carefully. "Now that's a real sensible idea. You get in there good and young and stay with it. That's how to go places."

Don could smell the steaks and the coffee and he suddenly knew he was really hungry. He sat back in the chair, looking up at the paraphernalia of Steve's life of prospecting and trapping, stored on the cross beams under the rafters—spare canoe poles and paddles, a pair of skis, rolled-up tents, a light mast with a sail furled on it. "I can't see it's good sense," Don said. "Working inside and doing the same thing over every day. I wouldn't stay with it anyway, not with the fishing coming up every summer."

Steve forked the steaks out of the frying pan on to

a plate and set them on the table. "I see you got a buck this morning."

Don reached a hand round to the back of his shirt. "Is there blood there?"

"Blood and hairs on your left shoulder and blood on the underside of your wrist there. Where'd you find him?"

"Third gully this way from Shifting River. He was a four-point I saw there in the blackberry season—five if you count the brow points, but Uncle Joe don't let you count them unless they're real big."

Steve laughed. "Your uncle's a great guy for things like that. Real particular sometimes, and it don't do any harm." He pulled a chair up to the table and sat down. "You're getting to be quite a hunter, picking your bucks ahead of time that way. I guess your uncle taught you that too."

"He says a man ought to know what he's out after. There's not much to just walking around till you see something."

"How are you on the fish?"

"I stack up alongside most of the rest of them. The *Osprey* was high boat this year around the local bunch."

"Put some salt on those steaks," Steve said. "You like fishing much as you figured you were going to?"

"Sure do. It gets to be a hard grind sometimes, starting out early and quitting late, but a man's his own boss. I'd like to get up north, with the big boats. A guy can't make much on this small time stuff."

"I never heard a fisherman that didn't talk that way. Then he gets a big boat and right away he wants a bigger one yet. What boat you been looking at now?"

"Phil Eastey's. He called her the *Mallard* and she's a honey. I could make it pay if I had her."

Steve nodded. "That's a good boat sure enough. Old Knocky built it for one of his boys three or four years ago. But I guess it would take quite a piece of money to own her. Maybe your aunt is kind of smart, suggesting that sawmill job."

"That's not the way she's figuring," Don said. "She figures I ought to get on at the mill and stay there steady. She says just bums have boats."

"What does your uncle think?"

"He doesn't say so much—you know how he is. But I think he figures it's O.K. for a man to go fishing if he wants—or trapping or anything else, so long as he works at it and pays his way." Don wondered about that, about having said "trapping" just that way. Aunt Maud had tied trappers and prospectors right in with fishermen—they were all bums, she said, men that couldn't settle to anything; it seemed almost like telling Steve she thought he was a no-good. But Don wanted to talk trapping; that was what he had come up for, and the chance to start the subject seemed too good to miss.

Steve didn't know anything about that. Looking at Don's empty plate he asked: "What can you eat now? There's a can of peaches open here and there's a pie Ray baked last night."

"A piece of pie would be just right. Where'd Ray go?"

"He's hunting wood-logs down along the lake. Should be back most any time now."

"I guess he'll go up to his trap-line this winter, same as usual, and George and Ed Scales will work theirs too?"

"Sure, they'll all go out. Ought to be fair prices this season, the way things look. George and Eddie have been working on a bridge crew all summer, but I look for 'em to come through any time now. Ray means to stay and put in work on the claims till snow gets bad there, but that won't be so long now, up four thousand feet."

Don finished his pie and sat back in his chair. He had been hungry, almost without knowing it, but he felt good now. And it was a fine chance to ask the question that had brought him up—it would come in easily and naturally, the way he wanted it to. "I'd like to get me a trap-line this winter," he said.

Steve nodded. "I figured that was it, likely. It's no wonder your aunt wants you on steady at the mill."

"But a guy can make good money trapping," Don said. "How much can he clear in a season?"

"That depends on a whole lot of things. How good the guy is, for one. And how good his line is for another, and how hard he works at it. And there's the price of fur and the kind of winter it is and the kind of breaks he gets—heck, there ain't no straight answer to a question like that."

"You reckon fur prices will be good this season?"

"Best for a long time I shouldn't wonder."

"Then if a man had a good line and worked at it he ought to make out pretty fair?"

Steve nodded reluctantly. "Should ought to," he said. "You think you'd like it?"

Don sat forward eagerly. He couldn't pretend to be casual and matter-of-fact any longer. "Sure I would. Anybody'd like it. I'm only scared maybe they'll say I'm too young and maybe I won't make out so good at it."

"You've got to like it a whole lot better than just for the money there is in it. It ain't just like hunting; there's plenty hard work and grief to it all through, and a man don't get on to it right away."

"I know that," Don said. "I heard Dad say the hardest work he ever did was running a trap-line five winters in Montana, before he got married and moved on to Spokane. But if a man likes the woods he ought to be O.K. A whole lot better than working in a sawmill anyway."

Steve was looking out of the window. "Here's Ray coming in now. Likely he'll have something he can tell you about it."

They got up and went out of the cabin and down to the beach. Don watched the little red canoe sliding towards them, dipping and bobbing to the gentle blue waves of the light westerly breeze. As it came near the beach Ray set down the paddle and stood up with the pole in his hands. He checked the speed of the canoe

before the bow could touch the gravel, then vaulted easily to dry land on the pole, reached back, caught the canoe and drew it gently up out of the water.

"Hello, stranger," he said to Don. "How's the family?"

"Fine," Don said. "Ellen was asking the other day when you'd be coming down our way again." He ducked quickly as Ray reached out to grab the collar of his shirt. "That's right she did. Can I help it if I tell the truth?"

Steve laughed. "Ray wastes so much time dreaming about her the government wouldn't allow him a nickel an hour for the assessment work he does at the claims if they was wise to it."

"What you got that's good to eat, Steve?" Ray asked. "I'm hungry." He turned to Don. "How's the fishing? All through for the season now, I guess."

"That's right," Don said. "But it was plenty good while it lasted. If I'd had a big boat I could have made real money outside."

"And so now you're looking for a way to get a big boat for next season."

"How'd you guess it?" Steve asked as they went into the cabin. "He's figuring on Phil Eastey's boat. I never saw it fail yet; a fisherman just can't be satisfied to make good with what he's got."

"Don's young," Ray said. "He can afford to put what he makes back into boats and gear for a few years yet."

Later, when Ray's meal was in the pan, Steve said, "Don's figuring to go trapping this winter."

Ray laughed. "I bet that one went over big with your aunt," he said.

"She don't know about it yet," Don told him.

Ray grew serious again. "A man could do worse with the price fur looks like it ought to be. You've kind of got the makings of a woodsman, Don. How old are you now?"

"Sixteen."

Ray shook his head. "Not so good. The only way you could work it out is for your uncle to register the line and take out a license for you. What country are you figuring on? Down the river and along the beach?"

"Partly," Don said. "But I'd like to go back in the woods too. I figured maybe there was some place a guy could pick up a few marten in the early part of the season."

He saw Ray look quickly across at Steve and smile. Steve said: "Might be O.K."

"Look, Don," Ray said. "The guy that had Shifting Valley last year isn't coming back. Lee Jetson over on Woods River figured to get it taken in on his line, but we don't want it that way. You know how it is up here—Steve and Ed and George and Louie and I kind of share the country around the lake, and we don't like what we know about Lee. If he took in up to the headwaters of the Shifting he'd be backed right up on Louie's line."

"You figure I could get it ahead of him?"

"Your uncle could. He's got the best claim to that line of anybody except maybe the Indians, and they don't want it. He'd have to register the line and take out the license, but he could make some sort of an understanding with the game warden about having you do the trapping. Ted Harper knows you well enough for that."

Don nodded. "I figured that was the only way it could be worked. I'd sure like to try the Shifting Valley. Just setting out a few traps around home don't seem to mean much."

"Don't sell that beach line short," Steve said. "There's a lot of money there in mink and coon if you go at it right."

"That's right," Ray said. "You might not get on to the valley so good the first winter. You have to know your country for marten. And you'll need a partner in there."

Steve cut a piece of pie and set it out on the table in front of Ray. "Louie could put him on to it some. Louie's the best marten trapper of the bunch of us."

"It won't be easy for him to see Louie much between then and now," Ray said. "He ought to have a partner in there anyway in case he'd get hurt or something."

"You know anybody you could get?" Steve asked.

"There's one kid might go," Don said. "He hunts a whole lot, but I don't think he knows much about trapping."

Steve looked across at Ray. "He could get to see

Louie when he was in there. Louie's top shelter can't be more than a mile through the pass from the head of the west fork."

"That'd be swell," Don said. "I could go through and meet up with him before the season started."

"Do you think you could handle it?" Ray asked. "It's lonely in there and it's hard work traveling over your lines day in, day out. You'll need to fix up the cabin and build new shelters, likely, and you'll have to back-pack from the foot of the big log jam—there's no sense to taking a canoe on past that."

"I can handle it," Don said. "If the folks'll let me."

"Steve and I can put in a word with your uncle, and we'll fix it up with Louie too. It'd be a whole lot of help to us to have you in there."

It was late afternoon when Don came out again to the bluffs above the open logging works. He stopped and stood quite still there for a moment, looking towards the solid green fold of Shifting Valley with a new, stronger sense of ownership. The talk with Ray and Steve Hardy had made it his own valley, somehow given him more real title to it than could ever be conveyed by technical and legal registration of a trap-line. "If you people haven't got first claim on the Starbuck Valley below the canyon and the whole length of the Shifting Valley, I don't know who has." Ray had said that not once, but several times, and Don now felt a surge of impatience in him at the difficulties that must be met before he could take possession of his own. There would be the arguments with the folks; Ted

Harper, the game warden, would have to prove as reasonable as Ray figured he would; traps and grub and gear must be bought, odd jobs around the farm cleaned up. All these things seemed trivial and wearisome, yet solid and infinite between Don and the proud and lonely possession he longed for. He wanted to be settled in the cabin up by the fork of the valley, with his traps and gear about him and only himself to order and plan and do.

The thought started him forward down the slope. He traveled faster and faster on sure, strong feet, letting the loose gravel roll down ahead of him to lodge again in the bends of the winding trail. On the level logging grades he drove ahead faster still. Ahead of him, on the trail down by the Starbuck, the big four-point was lying where he had rolled it under the log. He was still proud of it, proud of his clean and workmanlike job, glad that he could bring it back to the farm with him; and yet it was a delay between him and the winter ahead of him, a slowing of his pace towards his desire.



Chapter IV

DON SKINNED OUT HIS BUCK IN THE WOODSHED NEXT day. They had eaten the liver for supper the night before, and it had been a good homecoming; even Aunt Maud had listened to the story of the hunt and approved the manner and the result of it, without a word to suggest that it could all have been done in three or four hours instead of a whole day. Uncle Joe had been proud and pleased, probing and checking the details with slow easy questions that helped and guided the telling of the story. And Ellen had been funny about Ray, blushing and asking more than there was to tell, then suddenly shy and silent, afraid that Aunt Maud might overhear. Not at all the way Ellen generally was.

Skinning a deer was easy work; the hide came away cleanly and quickly to long smooth strokes of the knife. A man had to be more fussy with the little animals like mink and marten—if the skin was cut there might be something off the price, and yet if you left too much fat and grease on it it wouldn't dry so well and there'd be a whole lot more work later. Don heard the back door open and saw that Uncle Joe was coming out to

sit and talk while he skinned. He had thought that would happen and was ready for it, sure that this would be the time to talk the things that must be talked. Joe Morgan came straight into the woodshed and stood beside him, looking at the deer.

"You certainly picked a good one," he said. "He's just in perfect shape—plenty of fat and plenty of good clean meat on the right places." He sat down on a block and began filling his pipe. "You got any more good ones tied up back there?"

"There's one in the little swamp," Don said. "Kind of big too." He had the hide skinned away to the neck now, and reached behind him for the big knife. "All the others I know about for sure are farther back than this one was."

"You didn't see the buck in the swamp, did you? Seems like he could be the same one as was there last winter—the one with the white mark on his shoulder."

"Likely could be," Don said. "I didn't see this one but his bed was the same place. From the track he was an old buck."

Joe Morgan watched as Don cut the head away from the carcass and stood back to admire his work. Then he said quietly: "Did you see Steve Hardy yesterday?"

Don turned sharply round. "How did you know? Ellen tell you?"

"No. I knew you'd be going up there sometime and I figured yesterday was as good a time as any."

"Sure, I went through to the lake and saw Steve and Ray. I was going to tell you about it this morning."

Don felt a little sore; Uncle Joe was like that—always knowing things ahead of time—but he could have waited and given a guy a chance to speak first. Saying it out like that sort of put you in the wrong, made it seem you were trying to hide something. The chances were he knew about the trapping too and had his ideas on it already.

“How are they making out up there? It’s a long while since Ray came through to the settlement.”

“He’s coming out next week to pick up a load of grub.” Don took an ax and began to split wood as he talked. “Say, Uncle Joe, how’d it be if I went in trapping this winter?”

Joe Morgan knocked his pipe out and slowly considered the bowl. “Kind of depends on a whole lot of things. First of all it depends some on how your aunt feels about it. Then there’s where you figured to go and who you figured to go with; and I guess the law comes into it—Ted Harper’ll have something to say, one way or the other.”

Don let the ax come down crisply on the straight-grained fir, splitting off stove wood sticks in steady satisfying succession. The grain ran off to a knot and he turned the block to split along it. “I knew there’d have to be answers to most of those things,” he said. “But how would you figure about it? I wouldn’t want to go if you figured it was just plain crazy.”

“You’re kind of young, but I guess there’s been lots start in younger’n you, so that don’t mean much. I’d

say it depends a whole lot on what you expect to get out of it."

"How do you mean?" Uncle Joe always had a different slant to anything you had figured on, Don thought; there'd have to be a right answer to this and it wasn't too easy to see just what it should be.

"Well," Joe Morgan watched as Don reached for another block and carried on the sharp, easy rhythm of splitting the squared sticks away from it. "Would you be figuring to make real money at it—enough, say, to buy the *Mallard* next spring. Or just to put in a winter and maybe learn a little. It isn't every man can make out as a trapper, you know, and it's a hard life and hard work."

"I'd figure something of both," Don said. The answer seemed simple and easy and he made it without hesitation. "Steve and Ray reckon the fur prices ought to be pretty good this year and I don't see why I can't make out as good as the next guy if I work at it."

They talked on, working out the detail of Don's ideas, finding difficulties he had not thought of, settling these and going on to other things. Joe Morgan probed gently at what was in Don's mind and Don himself sorted it all out as they talked, making things real to himself that had been unreal and only half thought of before they started to talk. When Don turned back to pick up the head and hide of the buck and carry it away there was a great pile of freshly split stove wood stretching half across the woodshed. And he knew that he would be trapping during the coming winter. Aunt

Maud would have her words to say about it, strong and definite and perhaps bitter words; but when Uncle Joe talked the way he had been talking, his mind was made up and what he thought would rule what the family did. It might be better, Don told himself, if he made up his mind that way more often.

In the days after the talk in the woodshed Don was busy. He went down to Bluff Harbor and talked to Phil Eastey about the *Mallard*. Phil was in no hurry; he said he would just as soon live on the boat through the winter and sell her in the spring. "You might make the price of her," he told Don. "Trapping is something like fishing that way—if the price is good and a guy gets the breaks there's money in it; but it don't take much to wreck a season so as you're working for less than wages." Don saw Ted Harper, answered a whole lot of questions and went away little the wiser about what was in Ted's mind. But two or three days later Uncle Joe came back from a trip to Bluff Harbor and said there would have to be a map of the country Don wanted to trap—along the beach; up the Starbuck to the junction with the Shifting River and from there clear up to the head of the Shifting Valley. Don traced it off the big map that hung on the wall in the passage, then marked in his boundaries and they sent it off with Joe Morgan's application for the line.

Most days Don worked on the water wheel he had planned that day down at the clearing in the alders. In one way he was reluctant to do so—he didn't want it to seem that he was looking for Aunt Maud's favor,

particularly now when the whole question of what he was or was not to do during the winter was a family issue. But he wanted the water pumped up and running steadily and freely into the house for all of them—for Aunt Maud and himself and Uncle Joe and Ellen, particularly Ellen. And as the details of the plan grew clear in his mind his hands and body had to go to work to make them real and bring them to trial.

The first place he had thought of for the water wheel was the right one—up at the head of the pasture, where the river came free of the bend that carried it round the point of the ridge. He showed it to Joe Morgan one day. "When she's not working the raft can lie in the big eddy under the bank," he said. "That way it will be sheltered in freshet time." From the foot of the ridge a long ledge of flat gray rock jutted out to the strong white water that poured through the rapid and Don pointed to it. "All we've got to do is set a ring-bolt out at the end of the ledge and hang a block in that. Then we can haul the wheel out into the current with a winch on the bank and let it back in again when the tank is full."

"Looks pretty good to me," Joe Morgan had agreed. "Just figure out what hardware you'll need—pipe and so on—and I'll order it up from town. It'll sure be a big help to your aunt to have all the water she wants in the house, and I guess it won't hurt your and my feelings any not to be pumping and packing any more."

So Don took the *Osprey* out and picked up half-a-dozen dry cedar logs for the raft. He towed them up

river on the crest of a big tide that flooded the rapid below the farm and let him right up into the eddy behind the ledge. Once they were there his job lay up river, beyond the standing timber again, out in the logging works above the mouth of the Shifting River. Here he hunted the old grades for what he needed and what he knew he could find—spikes, wire cable, ties and planks from the discarded trestles. He built ties and planks into a raft to carry his spikes and cables and went back for the ready-made frame of his wheel. It was a heavy wooden drum that had once held a length of new cable for one of the logging donkeys, a strong solid thing held together by inch thick bolts passing clear through from side to side, and Don struggled through the better part of a day to roll it and tumble it down the slopes from the grade to the edge of the river. He worked it out on to his raft at last and flopped it over on its side, relieved that the task had not been beyond his strength. Uncle Joe would have come up to help him, he knew, but that was not part of his plan; he wanted to do it himself, using the lost time to plan and figure the way of it all, often letting his mind reach ahead to the Shifting Valley and marten traps and the cabin above the fork of the river and all the other details of the winter, then bringing it back again to the immediate problem. He was comfortable and happy in the task because things grew solid under him that way.

He brought the raft down to the eddy next day, poling up in the canoe to fetch it and start it out into the

current, following it down and working with peavey and pole to free it whenever the stream carried it against a rock. As he came opposite the rock ledge that sheltered his logs he checked the canoe in close to the rock, stepped out and held it, letting the raft slide through the fast water on a long line held in his hand. He had worried about this, afraid that the weight of the raft might be hard to check. But from the moment he began to tighten on the line he knew it would work out for him as the rest had. And in a little while the raft of timbers was hanging in the eddy alongside the logs he had brought up from the salt water. He was ready to begin building.

All the while he worked on the water wheel Don's mind was busy with the details of his winter. Every evening he brought out the mail order catalogues and worked over lists of equipment—traps, food, tools, nails, blankets, rope, pots and pans, anything and everything that his imagination suggested. He cut the lists down gradually, helped by Joe Morgan, until they included little besides traps and food; blankets, tools, pots and pans, enough of all these could be spared from the farm. Aunt Maud sat over her mending in silent disapproval. Ellen made suggestions occasionally. And the evenings passed swiftly for Don and brought him a slow sense of experience, a more exact realization of what lay ahead of him. Joe Morgan's casual advice, given almost reluctantly, built everything into hard reality, tied the distant idea in with things that were at hand, already owned and used.

The trips to Bluff Harbor to see Ted Harper and Phil Eastey helped in the same way. The game warden was not in a hurry to register the line and issue the license. He talked to Don whenever he saw him, asking questions, searching out his knowledge and his quality. Don answered his questions fully and easily, unaware that they were testing him. It felt good to have Ted ask: "How about the beaver in that creek that comes in just below the canyon? Are they building up any?"

"Sure," Don would say. "There's more there every year. There was a cougar around for a while last winter, but I don't think he did any damage to speak of. They've built two new dams since spring." He felt proud to be asked the question and prouder to answer it. Ted Harper would nod solemnly and ask again: "Been over that packtrail to the lake by Sulphur Creek lately? I heard there was a pile of windfalls came across it last spring." Or else perhaps: "How long does it take a man to get a canoe up through the canyon and clear to the lake from your place?"

Don would go back to work on his water wheel feeling more than ever that he had a share in the woods, a more intimate knowledge than almost any man of his own particular part of them. When he went out to hunt meat now he found he had new and different interests. He watched more closely than ever before for signs of small animals, he watched the movements of birds and fish, trying to judge from them what might be the movement of other creatures; above all he looked at the country in a new way, seeing it as a whole in-

stead of in broken pieces, consciously joining the little gullies and canyons into the lines of the larger creeks, tracing these to streams and lakes in the main valleys, uniting these at last to the Starbuck.

At every opportunity he turned towards Shifting Valley. Twice he went out after supper and poled his canoe up the Starbuck, into the Shifting and on to the foot of the first log jam; each time he turned back there because it was already almost dark. But he hunted the valley in daylight for two or three miles beyond the log jam and judged that the river was still good canoe water for as far as he went. Ray had said it was bad and there was no sense in portaging the jam, but Don made up his mind to try it and take the canoe up just as far as he could; avoiding even two or three miles of back packing would be good business.

As October went on he felt more and more that he wanted to see the valley properly, to find the cabin and search out the country beyond, where he would have to run out his marten lines. But the season would not be open until December and nothing was settled or definite yet. If he talked of going now Aunt Maud would set her mouth in that hard line and ask sharply, almost without opening it, if he had nothing better to do with his time; and the evenings after supper would become awkward, unfriendly times because nothing he or Ellen or Uncle Joe could say or do would break through the silent pall of Aunt Maud's disapproval. And there was always the water wheel; to go away before it was finished and had proved itself was impos-

sible—Aunt Maud had called it another fool idea that cost money and wouldn't work and Uncle Joe had told her flatly she was wrong. It had to work now, Don knew, or Uncle Joe would hear Aunt Maud's "I told you so" all winter long. Few people could say "I told you so" as often as Aunt Maud and no one could make the phrase more bitterly expressive of the utter worthlessness and faithlessness of all human life about her.

Don began to build his cedar logs into a raft the day after he brought the timbers down the river. He had eight good logs, each one round and dry and clean, twelve inches or more in diameter and fourteen feet long. He set the larger logs on the stream side, to support the weight of the wheel, then notched each log with saw and ax two or three feet from the upstream end. Into the notches he set a twelve foot bridge tie, bolting it clear through the outside logs and lacing the others to it with a length of half inch cable. Then he did the same thing at the downstream end of the logs and his raft was solid and strong. Uncle Joe came down before he had finished and began drilling the rock ledge for the ring bolt, as he had promised he would. Don told him: "She isn't as strong as she ought to be, just held together with cable like that. But I can go up sometime later and get more bolts out of the old trestle."

Joe Morgan nodded. "She'll hold together without that, but it might be as well to have bolts. What are you thinking to use for an axle?"

"Yew wood," Don said. "I cut a tree up in the little

swamp last spring. It ought to be dried out pretty good now."

"How would pipe do? Say, four inch."

Don considered it. Pipe would save a whole lot of time and worry, but the yew-wood axle had been part of his scheme from the very first. "Might be O.K.," he said at last. "But I'd as soon try the other first. I'm going to use two pieces of eight-by-twelve fir for bearings and I figure wood ought to wear better on wood."

He made the bearings next day, bolting two short lengths of eight-by-twelves together for each of them and boring through from the side with a four-inch boom auger. Then he set them in place on the raft, raising them on other blocks of timber so that the axle would support the wheel with the full face of one paddle just in the water. He built wooden paddles into the wheel, slanting them so that the water would grip as they went in and let them slide out freely as the wheel turned. The night he finished the wheel Don almost made up his mind to accept Joe Morgan's offer of pipe for the axle. But he wanted the yew wood; he couldn't properly say why and he tried to argue himself out of the idea, but he still wanted it. Joe Morgan was building the water tank up on the ridge and working on the pipe line leading from it to the house, so there was plenty of time. And the next morning Don started out for the little swamp to fetch the yew.

As he walked up the trail he thought of it as a trap-line, watching for sign of mink or coon along it, picking out trees that looked as though they would make

good sets. It was a fine day, but the woods were cool and soft after the rain of a week before; and a faint blue smoke haze had drifted in from slash fires farther down the coast, blending with the damp earth smell into a true scent of fall and making the heavy tree tops stand out against one another. Don could see bald eagles sitting in the trees along the river, dropping from them sometimes to go down after salmon, for the dogs were running well in the river now. He wanted to be down near the river, but held to the trail, promising himself a new freedom only a little way ahead now, a time when it would be work instead of play to watch animals and all they did. As he turned up from the trail and came near the swamp he began to move cautiously, working in there as he had on the morning he killed the buck across the Shifting River. He came again through the tangle of crab apple trees at the edge of the swamp, stepped out on to the dry brown reeds and stood looking towards the hummock of high ground ahead. His yew tree was there, not twenty feet from the old buck's bed. Nothing moved on the hummock and he started forward across the swamp. Then the buck stood up and Don saw him well. He was a four-point, his horns very dark and very heavy at the base; and on his right shoulder the white scar was clear against his gray-brown coat. Don stood quite still and the buck watched him for several minutes. Then it turned away and began to walk across the hummock. Standing, a moment before, it had seemed bold, almost contemptuous. Now it was low to the ground, moving

cautiously and smoothly. Suddenly it was out of sight. Don moved round quickly to see it again as it crossed the open between the hummock and the edge of the swamp. But he did not see it. There was a movement of some sort in the crab apples, a flicker of movement that might have been a grouse or a sparrow or a squirrel; but nothing more than that.

Don went up to the hummock and found his yew log. He needed a twelve-foot length of it, so he measured that length with his ax-handle and cut it away. It was an even better tree than he had remembered, very straight and clean, holding its size almost evenly through the twelve-foot length. And it was lighter than he had dared hope—a full summer had dried it out well. He lifted one end, crouched under the center and got it balanced on his shoulder. Then he started back across the swamp. Long before he got home he would be dragging it, he knew, but it was good to get a start across the level ground without having to do so.



Chapter V

DON WORKED THE YEW CAREFULLY INTO A GOOD AXLE, rounding it at two places where it would rest on the bearings and shaping one end to fit into the wheel. The rest of it he left as it was, for greater strength. The wood was hard and dry under his tools and his faith in it grew as he worked. Joe Morgan came down to help him hang the wheel and bolt the upper halves of the bearings into place.

"That's a good job, Don," he said. "And you haven't been long at it. I didn't say anything before you got started, but it didn't seem to me you'd be able to make it fit true and snug like this without using a lathe."

"'Tisn't as good as it ought to be, but it'll wear in some. Your idea of pipe for the axle would have been better a lot of ways, but the way it is now 'most everything came out of the woods and didn't cost except work."

Joe Morgan nodded. "You going to try her out now?"

"Hook the pump up first," Don said. "We may as well know it all at once."

The pump was bolted in place on the raft and Don had the connecting arm made already; they fitted the rod to the axle and then went up on the bank to draw the raft out with the winch. Joe Morgan said: "Shouldn't we prime the pump?"

Don shook his head. "No," he said. "She's good and tight and the lift is only a foot or so. She ought to suck without priming if the rig is worth a darn."

He began turning the winch and the raft moved slowly out along the ledge of rock. Don felt suddenly scared. The thing had to work, he told himself; there wasn't a reason in the world why it shouldn't except a man can always forget some one thing that matters on a job like that and throw the whole works out. He felt the raft tug as the outer edge of the paddles came into the current. Then the wheel began to turn, slowly at first, faster as he winched the raft right out to the block and the full width of the paddles caught the strong flow of water. The wheel was flashing in the sunlight now, turning with a satisfying, rhythmic splashing as each paddle dipped, lifted, came over and dipped again. They watched the discharge pipe on the pump. Suddenly there was a trickle of water from it, another trickle, then a half-hearted flow, a stronger flow, and it was pumping, a good heavy jet of water, the full diameter of the pipe at each thrust and draw.

"Boy," Don said. "That sure takes a load off my mind."

Joe Morgan was laughing. "It's the swellest darned invention I ever saw," he said. "All that water going

past there every day for thousands of years and all it takes is a couple of weeks to put it to work." He turned towards the house and put his hands up to his mouth. "Maud," he shouted. "Maud and Ellen, come on down here and see Don's wheel working." Then he turned back to look at the wheel again. "Yes, sir, that's something. Old Henry Ford himself couldn't have thought up a better one. All we've got to do now is hook on to the pipe-line up to the tank and we've got water in the house. As much as we want to use, for the garden or the stock or anything else."

Don saw that Ellen was running down from the house. Aunt Maud came to the doorway and stood there for a moment, then followed her. Ellen came up to them, throwing back her pretty, dark hair. "Let's see it," she said. "Don, you're wonderful. I didn't think you'd have it done nearly this soon."

She stood beside the winch, one long hand on the post, watching the paddle wheel in the sunlight. "It's pretty," she said. "Real pretty." She turned quickly to Joe Morgan. "Can we have a proper bathroom now, Dad? One with a shower and washbasin and everything?"

"I'll have to get the pipe paid for first," Joe Morgan said. "Then maybe we can."

Aunt Maud came up behind them as they talked. For a moment she watched the wheel and the jet of water from the pump. "It's early to be talking showers and washbasins yet," she said. "That's a mighty small

stream of water, Joe. What makes you think it can force clear up to the tank there on the hill?"

"It'll force," Joe said. "That's what them pumps is for. They ain't fast but they surely will force."

"I'll believe it when I see water coming in the house," she said. Suddenly her voice softened a little. "It's a real fine idea, Don, just the same. Somebody should have thought of it long ago and saved all these years of going short of water."

They coupled the pump to the pipeline that afternoon and watched the first feeble splash of water come through and lose itself in the emptiness of the tank. "It's quite a piece to force," Joe Morgan said. "But I knew darn well she'd do it. And if she hadn't I'd have bought a bigger pump."

Don felt a little disappointed as he watched the weak, broken flow. "It sure is slow," he said. "She'll pick up some when the river's high, but it don't look much the way it is now."

"Don't need to be much," Joe Morgan told him. "It don't cost a thing to run that rig twenty-four hours a day, except maybe a little grease for the bearings once in a while."

By suppertime there were several inches of water on the floor of the tank and a good strong flow at the old rain barrel tap over the sink in the kitchen. It was Don's evening. Aunt Maud piled his plate with potatoes and gravy and meat and opened the first jar of corn of the season; there was a fresh cake, fluffy and rich with eggs, and iced in three layers; and Don's favorite

black-cap raspberries that were always kept for special occasions. After supper Aunt Maud said: "I've looked out some things you'll need to take back in the woods with you. There's blankets and a few pots and pans and odds and ends of this and that."

"Gee," Don said. "Thanks a lot, Aunt Maud."

"Don't thank me," she said. "I don't hold with your going. But it seems your mind's set on the idea and nobody but me is willing to say a word against it."

"Don's got a right to decide for himself," Joe Morgan said. "He's not wild and he's not lazy. There's men that do well enough for themselves trapping and fishing and if Don's set on it there's no good reason why he can't go ahead and try it out."

Aunt Maud dragged the big darning basket over towards her and sat down. "He's too young to be working round in his own time. He ought to get used to regular hours and someone to watch him first. Then maybe he'd be fit to go out on his own."

"Don don't need anybody to watch him. Nobody had to watch him when he was fishing last summer and he made out all right."

"Just the same, he's too young. Seems like every young kid on this coast has to go get him a boat soon as he's out of short pants. Then it's no more school, no more discipline, no more attention to what any other body wants at all except himself. He's got to be out fishing or trapping or beachcombing or prospecting, talking big all the time about what he's going to do and never doing enough to butter a piece of bread. If Don

was the same as the rest of the riff-raff around here I wouldn't say so much. But he's better than that and he ought to make a better chance for himself."

Don watched Aunt Maud in growing surprise as she talked. You had to admit it was a real nice, friendly way to put it up to a guy and he wondered what Uncle Joe would have to say, if it would change him any.

The way Joe Morgan pushed his chair back and fumbled in his pockets for his pouch and pipe showed that he was surprised too. But he said: "That's right enough, Maud, about most of the young fellows around here. But you say yourself Don's different from the general run of them. And that's why I say he could make a stick of it where they couldn't."

Aunt Maud breathed a deep and practiced sigh. "Have it your own way," she said. "I knew you would anyway—that's why I picked out the stuff. But I still say it isn't right and Don's the one will be sorry for it some day soon enough."

"I'll change over if I don't make good," Don said. "Honest I will, Aunt Maud."

"See you do. I don't want to talk about it any more now. It's no use to talk."

Joe Morgan lit his pipe. "We leave that wheel running all night and the tank ought to be full by morning."

"No chance of freezing?" Don asked. "Feels like there'll be a frost before morning."

"Nothing to hurt when she's running. We'll have to

be good and careful to drain her when it's real winter though."

Before he went to bed that night Don checked over the stuff Aunt Maud had picked out for him. It was all there, but it was better than she had said; the blankets were the red Hudson's Bay four-points, not the cheap heavy gray ones he had expected to take. Aunt Maud's own second-best frying pan was there, polished to shining black, and a new aluminum coffee pot. Don picked up the coffee pot and lifted the lid. Inside there were two small aluminum plates, two cups, a knife, fork and two spoons, all new; he knew she had bought them especially for him and after he was in bed he lay for a long while thinking about her and wondering why she had done it when she was so much against his going. It made you feel badly when Aunt Maud did something nice for you like that, as though you didn't deserve it because of all the mean things you had thought about her. In some ways it felt better when she was plain mad at you, but if she was going to help like that about going up Shifting Valley it would make things a whole lot simpler. Don forgot about Aunt Maud and began thinking of the valley, what the cabin was like, how the country would be, how far up the river he could take the canoe; and in a little while he was asleep.

He woke up early next morning. He had set the alarm clock fifteen minutes earlier than usual but he was able to reach over and turn it off before it rang. There would be plenty of time to go up and look at



the water wheel before Uncle Joe came down and started out to the barn to milk. Don dressed quickly and quietly and started downstairs, then stopped half-way as he saw a light under the kitchen door. He went on and found Joe Morgan starting the stove. Joe looked surprised to see him. "Early, aren't you, Don?" he said.

"Thought I'd go see if the tank was full before milking," Don told him.

"I'll go along with you," Joe Morgan said, as though he hadn't thought of such a thing before. He got the stove going and they went out together. There was frost on the ground and a waning moon in the sky, so it was quite light, but no matter how he tried Don couldn't see whether there was water coming from the overflow pipe of the tank. They could hear the wheel turning almost as soon as they left the house and when they saw it it looked fine, black and silver and shining in the moonlight. Standing by the winch Don thought: You go away from something like that and do hundreds of different things—milk the cows, eat supper, listen to the radio, go to bed, sleep all night—and it seems like a long time. Then you come back and find it still going exactly the way you left it and it seems a short time. He said: "Do you think the tank is full?"

Joe Morgan shook his head. "I doubt it. Fifteen hundred gallons is a lot of water. Sure looks good out there though, doesn't she? Running all night long and no reason to worry about her or even think of her."

Don reached for the handle of the winch and began

to wheel the raft in. The paddles slowed and stopped turning as they came into the sheltered water.

"What are you going to do?" Joe Morgan asked.

"Just check her over," Don said. "Put some more grease on the bearings and make sure everything's O.K."

They went out on the raft and Don felt the pump, then looked at the two main bearings and checked the paddles. "We're liable to lose one once in a while," he said. "If a chunk comes down and hits it. But it shouldn't be bad for that now—just when the river comes up." They went back on to the bank and Don began to winch the raft out again. The paddles did not start turning so soon this time and Don said: "I guess that's the weight of water in the pipe." He took another turn on the winch, the wheel moved a little and then there was a single sharp crack, clear against the sound of the rapids. The wheel sagged down a little into the shining black water and stopped. Don had left the winch and started out along the rock ledge almost before the wheel started to sag. He stood on the raft, looking at the dead, lop-sided thing that had seemed so brave and good in movement, and all the hundred bright facets of pleasure he had known in the few hours since the wheel first turned were suddenly dead within him. Joe Morgan came and stood beside him. "It's nothing that can't be fixed, Don," he said. "I can still get that pipe. Or we could try another wooden axle if you want."

The tears were sharp and hurting in Don's eyes and

his throat was choked so that he couldn't have spoken if he had wanted to. He turned away, went back on the bank and began to winch the raft in again. "Nothing works out right," he said.

"Do you want to go up and see how much water there is in the tank?"

"No," Don said and began to walk towards the house.

Out in the barn, as he milked, Don thought of what had happened—over and over again, in every small detail. In his mind he pictured the stupid, drunken angle of the wheel against the moonlit water. He remembered how the grain had run out a little at that one place on the axle where it had broken; nothing very much, just a slight bulge that he had had to take down—probably covering up a pin knot he had told himself. Uncle Joe was right, he knew: it wouldn't be hard to put in a new axle. But for now he didn't want to think of it that way. He didn't want to go back and work on it again or to hear Aunt Maud say what she surely would say about the time wasted in making a wooden axle. Above all he didn't want Uncle Joe to be sympathetic about it. He thought of going down to see Tubby Miller—Tubby would listen and say it was tough and chew on a piece of grass and listen some more; there were times when it was better to talk to another kid than anyone else. But even talking to Tub wouldn't help much; you'd feel better while you were doing it, then worse than ever when you had to come

back and the wheel was still broken and idle in the calm water behind the rock ledge.

At breakfast Aunt Maud asked if the tank was full. Without looking at Don, Joe Morgan said: "About a foot from the top. Ought to be enough to run you a week or more."

"We won't be using it so fast," Aunt Maud said. "Not until we get used to having it. When a person's been used to being careful all their life you don't change over so easy."

Don wanted to say: Forget about being careful. You don't have to be—that's what we put the darn thing there for. But he saw in his mind the wretched, sagging wheel and knew that it wasn't time to say that yet; the thing just hadn't worked out the simple, clear-cut way it was meant to and now all the fun had gone out of it.

He had known almost from the first what he would do. As soon as breakfast was finished he went upstairs and began loading his packsack. He took it downstairs and out through the door on the river side of the house, listening to make sure that Ellen and Aunt Maud were busy in the kitchen. The canoe was drawn up on the beach in the eddy, a little below the water wheel, and he laid the heavy packsack beside it. He found Joe Morgan mending harness in the barn. "I'm going up the Shifting for a few days," Don said. "Just to sort of look things over."

"Sounds like a good idea. How much stuff will you take in this trip?"

"Not so much. I've got the packsack loaded pretty

good, and those traps that came the other day. I'd just as soon take a few spuds and carrots now. But I really want to see what the place is like before I start moving stuff up there."

Joe Morgan nodded. "Yes," he said. "It may be a lot different from how you think it is. What grub have you got?"

"There's some still on the *Osprey*. I'll take that."

Joe turned over the piece of leather he was working on and looked at it carefully. "Maud and Ellen are going down in the skiff to catch a ride to town with Sandy Merrill. I'll get you something soon as they leave."

"Thanks a lot," Don said. There wasn't much food on the *Osprey*, but he hadn't wanted to go and ask Aunt Maud for any.

Joe Morgan laid the harness aside and stood up. "We may as well go get the spuds and carrots now. By the time we've done that they'll likely have gone."

As they were walking across the pasture towards the potato pit Joe Morgan asked: "How soon will you be coming out?"

"Three or four days, I guess. Call it Saturday."

Joe nodded, but Don could see he was thinking about something, trying to find a way to say it. Joe said at last: "You'll be going in alone this trip?"

"Sure, I don't need any help just to get a line on things."

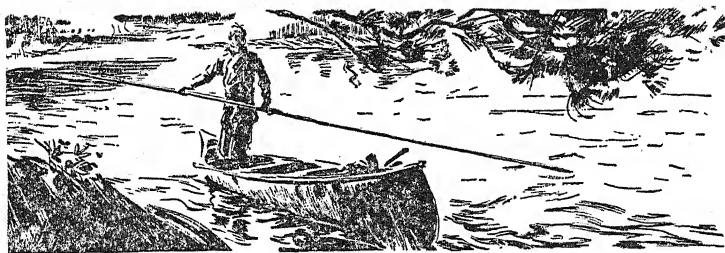
"Do you still figure to go alone later on?"

"I don't know. I asked Tub Miller about it the other

day, but it didn't seem like he'd want to come. I think I'd as soon be alone anyway."

"'Tain't right for a man to go off in the woods alone for more than a day or two. He may break a leg or something and die of it if nobody knows to go out and look for him."

They went to work and sacked the spuds and carrots then, talking of other things. But Don knew Joe hadn't said all he meant to. He thought: Somebody's been telling him about Lee Jetson—maybe Ted Harper or Phil Eastey. But the line's registered now and Lee's got his own line, so there isn't much he can do about it. Phil reckons Lee is a bad actor and so do the boys up at the lake, from the way they act when they talk about him. But there's no way I can see for him to act mean over this unless he puts in a kick that I'm too young to have a license without a grown man to watch me. And even Phil says he won't do that.



Chapter VI

DON STILL HAD A GOOD PART OF THE MORNING AHEAD of him when he stepped into the canoe and started up the river. It was a fine morning, but the wind had switched to the south and there were clouds moving up. Uncle Joe had said: "Looks like she's going to storm for a few days." Don had shaken that off quickly. "Guess I'll have to get used to tough weather before the end of the winter," he had said. "No use to start waiting on it now."

Getting a start felt good. He took the canoe out around his broken water wheel and on up into the rapid, without stopping to look at the wheel or the raft. Once it was behind him he felt free of it. It would have to be fixed some time, but the days immediately ahead were his own and when he came back from them he would know a lot of things more surely; getting the wheel running again would only be a single quick job to be hurried out of the way before the really important business of the winter. He forced the loaded canoe up against the heavy water with strong, cunning thrusts of his pole and kept his mind on what was ahead. He

wanted to get up into country he had never seen before, up the Shifting and beyond the log jam. It was suddenly important and very exciting; so much depended upon what that country was like, what the river was like above the log jam, just where the cabin was and what sort of shape it was in, whether there were trails going up beyond it that would help him get out his traps.

Don was a good canoe man. Tubby Miller had first shown him how to go about it—Tubby Miller poling his dumpy skiff stern first up the rapids to go trout fishing. Joe Morgan had taken up where Tubby's rough and ready knowledge ended and given Don a share in a real riverman's knowledge. And Joe had found the canoe, a sixteen-foot Peterborough that made Tubby's skiff seem the awkward thing it was. That had all been in the first summer after Don came up from the States and in the years since he had used the canoe almost as other boys used their bicycles. He knew every rock in the river between the farmhouse and the canyon; he knew the river at all its different heights, in all its divisions and little passages round bad places. Even now, when he wanted above everything to be seeing new things and a new river, he was glad that a reach of the big river lay ahead of him before he must turn into the lighter stream of the Shifting. He stood well aft in the canoe, his feet a little apart, his body straight and balanced. Packsack, food, rifle and tools were piled just forward of amidships so that the canoe rode with the bow almost, but not quite, lifting from the water; to

lift it he had only to shift his weight on to his back foot.

He poled on the side of the canoe nearer the bank of the river—this was one of the solid habits developed under Joe Morgan's instruction. "Don't ever get to be a one-handed canoeman. Some places you'll have to pole on the right, some places you won't be able to get a good grip except on the left. And it's only common sense to pole on the inside, no matter which bank you're following—that's where the shallowest water'll be. You're liable to be poling a glacier river some time, where you can't see bottom." It had bothered Don at first to pole at all on the left side of the canoe, but now he was not even conscious of when he changed. Working up towards the mouth of the Shifting he held all the way to the side he had started on. His pole was a good long one, fourteen feet or so of peeled and seasoned fir sapling, with the end pointed and charred so that the point would remain sharp for a while against the rocks of the bottom. Don brought it quickly forward at the end of each thrust, plunged it down into the fast water just ahead of him and close alongside the canoe, caught his weight on it as the movement of the canoe brought it level with him, and thrust again. Each thrust was two handed, powerful and long, making full use of every inch of the pole, and his progress upstream through the broken rock-scattered water was smooth and easy. Nearly always he was working up in the shelter of some rock whose crown was just above or just below the surface of the water. As the bow came

up to the rock he would swing the canoe to one side or the other, force it up towards another rock, swing from that to yet a third. Occasionally he was driven out into a full flow of broken white water and then he moved more quickly with his pole, shifting his weight cunningly to balance the canoe to best advantage against the surging current waves. Don loved all this, loved the strong sense of power and control that the maneuverability of the canoe gave him, the leap and sound of strong water all about him, the tugging vibration of it against his pole and the heave of it under his feet against the shell of the canoe.

Whenever he came to one of the long slow pools of the river he poled lazily, often with one hand. The dog salmon were still running, and twice he saw the black, round heads of seals against the quiet water. Each time he reached for his rifle, but before he could shoot the heads drew smoothly down and showed again only at extreme range. Bald eagles swung out of the tall trees at his passing or lumbered up from the beaches, and resting schools of salmon sped from the shallows; but the silent passing of the canoe disturbed them little more than it disturbed the water of the river—there was a momentary spreading apart to give passage, one or two little whirlpools of sudden activity, then again the smooth unchanging flow between the high green banks.

Don judged it was about noon when he turned into the mouth of the Shifting. He threaded the canoe through the maze of great round boulders where the

little stream joined the main river and suddenly he was traveling in the woods instead of through them. Alder and spruce and cedar came right to the water's edge and seemed almost to meet overhead. He had to pay closer attention to what he was doing, turning the canoe out around sweeping branches that touched the face of the water and danced to its movement, swinging it sharply to avoid a gravel bar, following nearly always the center of the main channel, where the current was strongest, because the more sheltered water was too shallow.

The rain began when he was about two miles up from the main river, a few heavy spattering drops on the face of the stream. The wind stirred the tops of the trees along the banks and Don could see low clouds above him moving fast against the gray sky. By the time he came to the log jam, wind and rain were driving down the valley in full storm. He thought of finding shelter and making camp there, but there were several hours of gray daylight still ahead and he knew it would be better to use them than wait them out. He unloaded the canoe and hauled it up on a gravel beach just below the jam. Then he slung the packsack on his back, picked up his rifle and started out along the trail.

A few hundred yards above the jam the stream divided into two channels. The trail followed the larger of the two and Don judged that he could still work the canoe up. The floor of the valley was very flat for a long way on either side of him and he began to notice dry channels of the river cutting through gray gravel.



By the time he came to the log jam, wind and rain were driving down the valley

The hills started up sharply in sparse-timbered bluffs on either side of the wide flat and looking at the straight faces Don felt as though he were walking in the bottom of a box. It was not a pleasant feeling. Away from the canoe he felt lonely for the first time. The wind and rain in the sodden green of the spruce and balsam trees were gloomy and cold and somehow menacing. The dripping woods seemed to have no life except his own and there was no promise of warmth and dryness at the end of the day. He told himself that he would find shelter under a rock or a root and build a great fire. And tomorrow, perhaps quite early in the day, he would find the cabin. But he still felt the oppression of the valley and he began to wish he had Tubby Miller with him. Tubby's round face would be red and with rain running from it, Tubby would be groaning and complaining about the weight of his pack, about having to hike, about getting wet and cold, but he would be friendly and good-natured about it, he would laugh often and make foolish jokes so that you wouldn't notice anything but him. But Don knew he had not tried very hard to persuade Tubby to come because he wanted to do the thing alone; Tubby would be slow, he had told himself, and fooling too much, but that wasn't it really. Tubby's being there would have confused things, left him still without the clear knowledge of himself that he somehow wanted.

Don judged he was about two miles above the jam when the two main channels of the river came together again. The trail had followed the larger fork closely all

the way and he was sure there was no place in it that he could not pass with the canoe, so he slung the pack-sack under a log and turned back downstream. On the way back to the canoe he noticed again the many false channels of the river; some of them seemed as big as the regular channels, yet they were nearly all quite dry. Then, for the first time, he understood the reason for the river's name. Shifting River, he thought. This whole flat in here must be loose gravel and every time she floods she cuts through a different place. Likely that will mean more log jams up above, unless they mostly wash out and pile up on this one down here.

He packed the canoe and the rest of his stuff around the big jam and began to pole upstream again. It was cold, facing into the wind and rain, and he was already wet almost to the skin, but he made good time up to where he had left his packsack and from there on it was still easier because of the bigger flow of water in the single channel. He portaged around two more small log jams and noticed dry channels cutting away above each one. It was getting late now and he began to look for a place to camp. He saw a big uprooted fir on the bank and checked the canoe. Holding on the pole in midstream he looked ahead and saw that the hills seemed to close in tight on the valley only a little way farther up. For a moment he hesitated, then decided to go on. The bed of the river began to change from the loose gravel of the flat to larger rocks and boulders again, and there was rock outcrop along the bank; then suddenly he was coming up through a short

rapid to a deep, wide pool and beyond that the river disappeared between steep, sheer walls of a high canyon. As he came on to the pool he could hear the roar of falling water somewhere just out of sight in the canyon. For a moment he was tempted to go on and see what it was, then he swung the canoe in sharply towards the bank of the pool. It was almost dark and he remembered another of Joe Morgan's sayings—"There's always another day ahead. Some men keep on traveling till it's too late to make a decent camp, but I never could see the sense of that."

Don was glad he had stopped. He found what he wanted almost at once—a wide overhang of flat rock, with a six-foot square of dry ground under it. A big, leaning Douglas fir stood nearby and in a few minutes he had cut away enough bark from the dry underside to keep in a good fire for as long as he would need it. He cooked himself a big supper of beans and bacon and coffee and almost as soon as he had cleaned up after it he was ready to roll into his blankets and go to sleep.

Once or twice in the night he woke up and heard the wind heavy in the tree tops and sensed the fall of rain about him in the darkness. But he was warm and dry where he was and quickly went to sleep again. When he next woke there was a faint grayness of daylight in the small patch of sky he could see beyond the jut of the ledge and he knew it was time to cook breakfast and go on.

After eating he packed up his blankets and went

straight down to the canoe. The ledge where he had camped was a few feet from the trail, but he still wanted to see what the canyon was like. Ray had said there was no sense to taking a canoe beyond the first log jam, and probably there was something in the canyon that was impossible to pass; but every mile he could work up the river was one mile less of backpacking, and the canoe would carry a bigger load in one trip than a man could in half a dozen. So he slid the canoe into the water, loaded his stuff into it and went on.

There was an awkward place at the very start of the canyon, a rush of deep white water through the narrow entrance, but he forced the canoe over it and came out onto smooth green water, very deep between the sheer walls. The falls were about a hundred yards from the entrance, a sloping drop of six or eight feet. Don paddled the canoe to the foot of them and knew at once that if there was nothing worse he could get through. The water poured down through a narrow cut in the center of a slanting face of rock, leaving a broad clear slope on either side across which to carry the canoe. He made the portage easily and found himself over the deep green water again. It was very still in the canyon, for the wind passed over two or three hundred feet above him and the only sound away from the roar of the falls was the patter of rain on the face of the river and the little runs and trickles and drippings of water from the straight rock walls. Don guessed that he might be the first man who had ever gone through and the

idea was exciting and a little frightening. He had had the same feeling before, about other places—a narrow gully in the hills perhaps or a tiny hidden swamp in heavy timber—but it had always been possible to discount it, to know certainly that someone had seen and passed through before, perhaps not treading the exact square foot of ground or brushing against the same salal leaves, but still testing the place and making it safe and known.

This time it was different. Don had learned that few men understood water, especially the waters of small places. He had found it again and again among the fishermen who worked the inside waters, against the strong tides; some were confident, knowing surely the limitations of the dangers; but many more were almost superstitiously cautious, following only sure and tested ways, accepting impossibility on faith. Woodsmen were the same; a few were good canoemen, sure of their skill, needing no sanction of other's passing; but nearly all would use only the lakes and the easy part of the rivers, taking to the trails at the least sign of difficulty. This high and narrow canyon, with the falls so near its entrance, would surely turn them back even if they had troubled to pass the log jams below it.

The silence of the place and the moist green of the dripping walls strengthened his conviction. He looked hard at everything about him, trying to use it and make it his own; at the same time he found himself checked and burdened by a greater caution than he had ever known in himself before. The certainty that no man

had passed that way made it possible that unknown dangers lay ahead or at hand. He tried to make them absurd by making them concrete—an intermittent, pulsing gush of water from the canyon walls at some point, whose quiescence would lure the canoe within its range and swamp it utterly with sudden activity. Or a sucking vortex set up by some freak fault of rock formation and drawing down into the bowels of the earth. Even a forgotten monster surviving in some hiding place in rock or water. It was easy to discount such things—the shapes of spawning salmon in the clear water were familiar and reassuring; a family of young mergansers scattered over the face of the stream ahead of him at one place, and two goldeneyes hurled overhead, turning sharply as the canyon walls turned a hundred feet upstream. The ferns and shrubs growing on the wet walls were known things and the shapes of the trees on the canyon rim were shapes of scrub fir and pine and hemlock. Yet he felt there was danger in discounting the unknown too easily. Some known and simple thing, some carelessness of his own, might swamp the canoe and destroy his passage as effectively as the most fearsome of unimaginable dangers. And then they would talk about it: "The fool kid thought he could make the canyon. They told him to leave the canoe at the first log jam, but he was too darn smart to take what anyone said. Of course Joe Morgan should never have let him go alone like that." The thought was more fearful than any physical horror could be.

Actually there were many difficult places in the

canyon. The heavy water in the narrow parts was always deep—often too deep for him to get bottom quickly with his pole and force up against it. Several times the canoe was thrown back and he had to drop quickly to his knees and pick up the paddle. Again and again he had to forget both pole and paddle and use the line to work round a difficulty. Once he fought a precarious way up nearly half a mile of fierce rapid in which he could find scarcely any safe resting place. He began to wonder about the length of the canyon, whether he would still be in it when night came. The walls were lower now and no longer so sheer; there seemed hope in that. But the water was almost constantly broken, dropping down through rock-strewn rapid after rapid, making him pole until his shoulders ached and his arms shook with weariness. He worked through one such rapid, with the wind and rain strong and cold in his face, and came out on to a smooth flow of deep water that curved round a jutting shoulder of rock. He rounded the shoulder and saw a log jam piled above him, huge and ancient, stretching away upstream out of sight. To see it like that was almost a relief, because it surely must be the end, without room for doubt or argument. He came up to it, stepped out and tied the canoe to a log bleached and weathered and shriveled to hardness that seemed stone rather than wood. Standing on the log he looked about him. There was a way out of the canyon, up over the broken rock slope on the left side of the jam, but it looked to be a steep and awkward climb and it was impossible to tell

how far back from the crest of the slope the trail might be. Don decided to explore straight ahead, so he took his rifle and packsack out of the canoe and started out over the tremendous tangle of logs and broken trees.

When he had climbed to the top of the jam he could see that it stretched ahead of him out of sight, filling the canyon from wall to wall. Traveling over it was not difficult, though the logs were mostly piled across the line he had to follow and occasionally there were gaps when he had to climb almost down to the level of the water and out again. Generally the river seemed altogether lost under them, silent and completely hidden. Yet all the trees that made up the first few hundred feet of the jam were stripped of bark and water-worn. Don passed two long curves in the canyon walls and then saw ahead of him the end of both jam and canyon. The rock walls stopped as sharply as they had begun. The jam spread beyond them for a little way, widening and tapering down to end in fresh trees brought down by the floods of the previous winter. Above it the creek flowed through gravel again, gently and almost quietly between sloping, timbered hills.

Don found the trail easily and decided to travel on and find the cabin before going back to his canoe. He came to it late in the afternoon, just below the west fork of the river. In his mind, ever since the day at Starbuck Lake when he had talked of the Shifting country with Ray and Fred, he had pictured a solid, low-built log cabin, set in a tiny clearing near the fork in the river. The picture in his mind had been very

clear, even to windows and door and stove pipe, white-barked alders in the background, the river in front running over a wide spread of gravel bars. What he saw now swept the picture instantly beyond recovery and tore away the last warmth of the elation he had felt at bringing the canoe through the canyon. The cabin stood on a flat a little below the level of the trail. Salmonberry brush grew thickly and heavily right up to the walls. Small fir trees and larger balsam grew all round it, shutting out the dull light of the wet day, dripping gloom and wetness upon it. The shake roof was covered with damp green moss and the logs of the walls were a slimy dark green, sagging from a true line on either side of the empty, staring black doorway. There was no window. A small fir tree lay at an angle across one corner at the back, where its fall had torn a great hole in the roof. Don came close to the wretched place and went in. The floor was bare dirt. As his eyes became used to the darkness he could see a rickety table under the hole in the roof and a rough double deck bunk along one wall, filled with damp, moldy bracken and balsam boughs. At one end a bar of dim gray daylight stood across a chimneyless rock fireplace. Don dumped his pack on the earth floor and sat down on it in weariness and utter misery.



Chapter VII

WHEN DON WOKE UP IN THE CABIN THAT FIRST MORNING the gloom and disappointment of the previous day flooded back upon him. He climbed out of the blankets reluctantly and set about cooking his breakfast in a solid determination that it would be the last meal he would eat in that dank and dismal place.

The rain had stopped, though the sky was still heavy with clouds and the wind poured down the valley and through the tree tops in sound that silenced the rapid below the cabin. He ate in the doorway, looking out at the light yet keeping the illusion of shelter, and as the coffee warmed him and the beans and bacon satisfied him his determination began to change. He thought at first of building a new cabin in a better, more cheerful place, but it was too close to the start of the season for that. After all, he told himself, he had slept in dry shelter through a bad night under the undamaged part of the roof. Much less than the work of building a new cabin, spent upon the old one, should make it almost comfortable. He got up from his seat in the doorway and went out to take a good look at the cabin.

Even in the morning light it looked gloomy and dilapidated, a part of the rotting dampness of the wet woods rather than something man had built for his own use. But the brush could be cut away from in front of it, the broken roof and corner could be repaired without much difficulty, the fireplace rebuilt and improved. Above all it could be given windows to bring it to life, and a solid new door to cover the blind gap that now led to darkness. If he could find enough good cedar a man might even put in a floor, Don decided. With a new bunk, a solid table and something to sit on, it would at least be so you could live in it.

He worked at the improvements through most of the next four days, taking time out only to go back to the canoe for the rest of his stuff and, once, a half day to follow the overgrown trail for a few miles farther up the main fork of the river. Some earlier inhabitant had left an old crosscut saw in the cabin; Don sharpened it with the flat file he had brought in for his ax and found that it cut well enough. There was cedar less than a hundred feet behind the cabin—two great trees, moss-covered and long fallen, but still solid and with a straight clean grain that split for twenty feet or more without running off. He cut thirty-inch bolts and split out shakes to repair the roof. Because the grain was so good he could not leave it, and split out boards for the table and bunk and benches and left them to dry out inside the cabin. Then he cut out two gaps in the walls for windows and boarded them up with split cedar—even that way they made the whole place feel better.

He repaired the fireplace with rocks and clay from the small west fork of the river and even built up a short wide flue to make it draw better. The whole thing was actually outside the cabin, but facing into it, dug out of a hump of ground just beyond the line of the end wall. In summer, Don told himself, a man wouldn't want to chance building a fire in the darn thing—but then in summer he wouldn't need to. It was easy to see that many fires had burned there and the cabin was still standing, but he told himself he would watch it closely if the weather turned cold and dry.

On the fourth day he cut and split firewood. There was a slender fir snag, bone dry and clean of limbs, a little above the cabin. He felled it across the slope and as he cut the blocks away he could roll them down and split them right at the cabin. It was raining again and he realized suddenly that he had not seen the sun in all the time he had been up the valley. This thought seemed to bring back the oppressive sense of loneliness and gloom that he had felt before on the way up and when he found the cabin. The valley was an unfriendly place, heavy and damp and dark, crowded by the high hills and empty of life. He began to wonder about the fur and game. So far he had seen only a few coon tracks along the river, otter sign at one place in the canyon and bear trails with the rotting remains of salmon strewn along them. Up the river beyond the cabin he had seen elk tracks in an alder flat, but no deer tracks. No deer tracks anywhere that he could remember, and that was a strange thing. He hadn't been watching for

them or thinking of them particularly, but he knew he should have noticed them somewhere, in spite of himself, if deer were plentiful—on a well-worn trail perhaps, or crossing a gravel bar.

He wondered about the marten, where a man should look for sign of them, where his trap-lines should run and how the traps should be set. It was important to get in and see Louie before the season started and now, with so much to be done, the time was getting short. Everything had to be done; it seemed suddenly piled on him, stifling him, holding him back from what he really wanted to be doing, as surely and strongly as Aunt Maud's opposition had threatened his whole plan at the start. Sawing the wood log there in the rain Don felt small and wretched and alone.

But he wasn't alone. A man was watching him from the slope of the hill across the river. He was a thin, stooped, dark man, forty or forty-five years old. He wore calked boots, rain-test pants dirty gray with age, a ragged mackinaw and a rain-test hat as old as the pants. He held a Winchester carbine in the crook of his left arm and leaned most of his weight on his right arm, the palm of the hand flat against the bark of a small hemlock tree. He watched Don intently, his black eyes peering under a low hanging branch of the hemlock and his black, stubble-bearded jaws moving solemnly and slowly on a chew of tobacco. After a little while he moved on down towards the river. There was no stir in his moving; he seemed to be able to pass through brush without shaking it and his heavy boots

made not the faintest sound; he traveled down the steep slope as steadily and smoothly as though he were on level ground.

It was quite evident he knew the country intimately. When he came to the river he turned upstream for a little way and crossed on a big fir that reached from bank to bank. Without hesitation he turned back from there and started towards the cabin. When he was still about fifty yards from Don he stopped and quietly opened the breech of his rifle. Don heard the sound and looked up quickly. He recognized Lee Jetson immediately, though he had seen him only once before, and in spite of himself he moved towards his own rifle, which was leaning against the log he was sawing. He checked the movement and said: "Hello there," in a voice that he tried to make sound casual.

Jetson said nothing at all. He just kept on walking across the flat, past the end of the cabin and towards Don. Don was scared. He had thought of Lee Jetson many times since leaving the farm. Jetson was why Uncle Joe had not wanted him to come up alone. Jetson was the man Ray and Fred didn't want too close to their trap-lines. Jetson had tried to extend the boundary of his own trapping country on Woods River to take in the Shifting Valley. Even Phil Eastey had said something about Lee Jetson—a careless remark about Don's trapping neighbors, little more than a joke but somehow with a warning in it. Don had never heard anyone say a good word for Jetson and yet he had never heard anything definite against him. Watch-

ing him now as he came up, silently and slowly, looking at the ground, he thought he could understand why men did not like him. He seemed somehow a dark and cunning man—he's mean-looking, Don thought, and he's got no business here. I ought to grab the rifle and chase him off.

Jetson came right up to the log and looked carefully at the cut Don was making before he spoke. Then he said: "I figured you'd be in here about now."

"Where did you come through from?" Don asked. He wished the rifle were in his hands instead of where it was, leaning against the log, and he wished Jetson would look directly at him instead of looking down at the saw-cut.

Jetson didn't answer the question. He asked one of his own. "You in for the winter already?"

"No," Don said. "This is my first trip."

"Think you'll like it?" Jetson looked up suddenly and Don saw his eyes for the first time. They were brown eyes, gentle but somehow troubled; from the left one a long scar angled up and back across his forehead, seeming to depress the lid so that the eye was half closed. Maybe that's why he doesn't look at you, Don thought. It does give him a kind of a crooked look, at that, with his sharp nose and the short beard on his chin and cheeks. He said: "Why wouldn't I like it? A guy's got to make a living doing something, hasn't he?"

Jetson didn't smile. He asked: "Figured out where you'll run your lines yet?"

"Sure," Don said. He thought: Who does he reckon

he is, asking questions all the time and never answering any. I should tell him everything he wants to know.

Jetson turned away. "Well, I'd better move along. Just figured I'd stop in and see how you were making out."

"Did you eat yet?"

"Not since this morning."

"You'd better eat here," Don said. "I was just going to quit and cook up something."

Jetson sat in silence, his back against the wall of the cabin, while Don cooked the meal. Don felt scared and somehow shy, as though he had no business to be there; he began to hate Jetson, yet there was no satisfaction in hating him. In spite of his almost aggressive questions and of this silence now, in spite of the way he looked and moved, there was a queer feeling of gentleness from him that you didn't want to hate.

When they were eating Jetson asked abruptly: "Is that right your Dad was a prospector?"

"He prospected some, but he worked at mining mostly." Don wondered about the question—it seemed so pointless it was almost stupid. "Why do you want to know?"

Once again Jetson would not answer. He asked: "Ever do any prospecting yourself? Your Dad tell you anything about it?"

"Not much," Don said. "I guess I was kind of young. He did show me chunks of rock plenty of times and tell me about them. He could make it real interesting."

"What did he ever find?"

"Nothing much, I guess," Don said. He thought of his father unrolling blue prints of mining claims, poring over ore samples with his miner's glass, planning to save money for a grubstake that would let him get away into the hills again. "He had claims in the Spokane country he figured looked good. And he'd talk about selling some claims to a big company when he was a young man. There was big money come out of them, but he didn't get to see much of it."

Jetson nodded slowly. "That's the way it is. The guy who finds it never does make out. Ever stake a claim yourself?"

"Who, me?" Don laughed. "I wouldn't even know how to go about it. A guy's got to have a license and all that, don't he?"

"I guess you look pretty close at rock when you see it any place in the woods though, after hearing your Dad talk and all?"

"No," Don said. "I don't pay much attention. If I did see something that looked different I guess I'd take it home and show it to Uncle Joe. That's all."

Jetson nodded again. He seemed more friendly now, but still reserved and suspicious. Don noticed that the scar above his eye was pale now, almost white; it had been deep red when he first came up to the log and still red when he sat down to eat. "This is kind of a poor built cabin," Jetson said. "Must have been built quite some years ago too. I guess you won't put in so much

time here this winter. You'd do better with a line along the beach for mink and coon."

"I figure to stay in long enough to get me a catch of marten," Don said. "But it sure is kind of gloomy. I guess it wouldn't take much for a guy to lose ambition in here."

Jetson looked up quickly, straight at Don for only the second time since he had come. "You'll be O.K.," he said. "It isn't hard to get marten if there's any around. And if there ain't I guess the best thing a guy can do is get discouraged and go look some place else."

"I can't. I've got to make her stick so as I can buy a boat next spring. I've kind of contracted to buy one already and if I don't make her on the marten I won't have the price when spring comes."

Jetson left as soon as they had finished eating. He said: "I'll be seeing you," and started down the hill. A few moments later Don stood watching the last of his movement in the heavy brush a little way up the river. He said quietly to himself: "That sure is one queer guy. 'I'll be seeing you'—the way he said that it could be a threat or a promise, whichever way you want to take it." All through the rest of the day he found himself stopping in his work to glance nervously down towards the river or peer up among the big trees on the sidehill above him; he kept the rifle close beside him with a shell in the breech and several times picked it up and held it in his hands just for the reassurance it seemed to give him. He just didn't know about Jetson, he told himself, and any guy that could melt around



through the brush the way he could would bear watching.

When he started out to go down the river to his canoe next morning he was suddenly excited and happy. There had been frost in the night and the cold had wakened him early in spite of his good blankets; the day was gray and heavy with clouds that crowded the hills on either side of the valley. But there was no longer any power of gloom left in the dark and heavy green of the big trees—the canoe was waiting at the foot of the big log jam and he would be home before dark if things went right, with known, friendly people to talk to and a story to tell them.

He noticed the river had risen a good deal since the day he came in and he wondered about the trip through the canyon. So far as he had been able to see on the way up there was no place in it that would be dangerous on a moderate rise like this; a man would have to watch he didn't come suddenly on the falls—the trip down would seem short out of all proportion to the way up—but Don knew he had the falls marked by a little thirty-foot cedar tree that grew curve-butted out of the canyon wall a few hundred feet above them, because there was no other like it anywhere in the length of the canyon.

Climbing over the big log jam he heard the water talking its way through the logs below him, growling and insistent and sometimes thunderous instead of light and lost as it had seemed on the way up. For a few minutes he worried that the canoe might not be safe

where he had left it, but it was there on the logs, still well above the reach of the water. He ran it down without hesitation and started out, excited and happy. The first long rapid was fast and good and easy, with water breaking spray over big boulders that had been dry four days ago. Any first trip must be exciting and Don realized that there could be treacherous places in the canyon. He kept going over the bad places in his mind, picturing them, trying to imagine the effect of the extra two feet of water piling through them or surging over them. There was one place, a narrow place with a right-angled turn, where the water shot through in force to strike the canyon wall and suck and heave along it in whirls and boils; Don came upon it suddenly in spite of himself and saw the canyon wall straight ahead of him. He set his weight forward a little and drove hard with the paddle. For a sharp moment there was tumbled water all about him, sheer rock ahead and the turn not made. He began the turn and the rebound of water from the rock sharply completed it. Then he drove the canoe again, with barely room for his paddle between canoe and canyon wall. Water slapped sharply and heavily over the bow, he slipped his weight back on his heels and then suddenly was in easy water again.

As he portaged around the falls he noticed how the rise in the river had leveled them off. A man could almost run them, he told himself—could run them with another couple of feet to smooth them out farther yet. If it didn't happen to go right there wouldn't be much

left to do about it, but just the same it ought to be possible. And if she was up a couple of feet more you'd just about have to make a try at it because the water would be up over the rock and there wouldn't be room to portage.

It felt strange to come out of the canyon. The river was suddenly small and easy again, turning and dividing in its gravel bed. There was no need to portage the upper of the two jams—a channel that turned off above it, dry four days earlier, now carried a good flow of water. Don was almost disappointed when he found there was still no way around the lower jam. He packed the canoe down first, then went back for his packsack and rifle and ax. When he came down to the canoe again he saw Tubby's white skiff drawn up alongside it and Tubby standing there, looking anxiously along the trail. Tubby's round, good-natured face was red and hot and very worried, and for a moment Don thought of cutting off the trail, making a circle and coming up behind him. But as he moved Tubby saw him. "Hello, Don," he shouted, his voice doubtful and a little frightened. "It's me, Tubby. Come on down."

Don went down to him. "Gee," Tubby said. "I'm sure glad it's you."

"Who'd you think it might be?" Don asked.

"Could've been Jetson," Tubby said. "Coming down with your canoe after murdering you up there. Or if I hadn't shouted maybe you might have thought I was Jetson and taken a crack at me with the rifle."

Don laughed. "I could see the skiff before I could see

you, so I knew who it was." He made his voice casual. "I saw Jetson back in there."

Tubby stared at him. "You did? What happened? Did he say anything?"

"Sure, we talked plenty." Don could see that Tubby was worried and confused, and he was careful to keep him so.

"Holy smoke," Tubby said. "Did he do anything? What did he say? Did he act mean?"

"Didn't get a chance to. I kept the rifle good and handy and watched him close all the time."

Tubby's eyes were really wide now. "Gee, Don, you shouldn't have gone in there alone like that. That's why I came up today. Mr. Morgan was plenty worried and I figured I ought to've come in with you at the start. That Jetson's a mean guy and he wanted this trap-line. Anyway, it ain't safe for a man to be alone in the woods anytime."

Don sat down on the gravel and stretched out his legs. "I dunno," he said. "Jetson's not such a bad guy. He looks kind of queer and mean, and he don't talk straight, but he ain't so bad."

"Just the same, you ain't going back in there by yourself no more. Because you ain't scared don't mean there's no reason for being scared. Sometimes a man's got better sense to be scared."

"I was scared all right," Don said. "He sneaked up out of the bush like a doggoned ghost. But when you got talking to him he didn't seem so bad except he

wouldn't answer a question. Seemed like he wanted to ask 'em all the time."

"What'd he ask about?"

"Plenty. How long I was going to be in and what I was going to do and all that. But mostly he seemed to want to talk about mining and prospecting. Kept asking did I know anything about rock and did I look for it in the woods."

"Then what did he do?"

"Just ate with me and went off, like he had come—sort of faded out into the bush."

Tubby shook his head. "Don't make sense, a guy coming on to another man's trap-line like that for no good reason at all. I tell you that guy wants watching, Don."

Going on down the river, first the Shifting and then the Starbuck, they forgot about Jetson. In the canoe Don could outrun Tubby's skiff; they raced and cut across each other and rode always the roughest, strongest water they could find. Very quickly they were at the farm. Passing the raft Don saw on it the length of pipe that was to make the new axle and he felt grateful to Uncle Joe for not putting it in. Maybe there had been water enough to last in the tank and Aunt Maud would never know of the failure of the yew axle. The yew axle seemed not to matter so much now anyway; there were other things to worry about and think about and Don knew suddenly that he was glad Tubby was coming back into the Shifting Valley with him. The thought of having to face again the

gloom of the valley and the wretched dilapidation of the cabin had weighed heavily on him; with Tubby along to laugh and talk and help, the darkest corner of the valley would seem less gloomy and the cabin would become a place warm and lived in.



Chapter VIII

DON FITTED THE NEW AXLE TO THE WATER WHEEL without difficulty and admitted to himself that it was a good thing—strong and smooth as the wooden axle could never have been. He said as much to Joe Morgan when the job was done and Joe said: "You had the right idea at that. There's many a good axle been made of wood, and you set out to make the rig out of what you could find lying around in the woods. I never did have no patience with running to the store for every least thing that's needed."

If Aunt Maud knew of the failure she did not mention it and Don found himself still in her good graces. But there were troubles at the farmhouse—he saw that at once on the evening he and Tubby came down the river. Ellen had been crying and Aunt Maud's favor to himself was carefully directed to emphasize that Ellen was out of favor. He learned from Tubby that Ray Baxter had come through from the lake earlier in the day and Aunt Maud had started in at once, as Tubby put it, to hone up her tongue on him. Ray had likely pulled out sooner than Ellen had hoped he would

and that was the reason for the tears. Don felt sorry for Ellen, though he tried to tell himself she was being foolish like any girl, and sorry for Ray too; a year ago he would have figured Ray was being foolish too, wasting his time on a girl that way, but it didn't seem so foolish now and you had to admit Ellen was real pretty even if she was your cousin and you lived in the same house with her. But the worst part of the business was missing the chance to see Ray. He needed to see Ray in the worst kind of a way, to ask him a dozen questions about the things he had seen and done up Shifting Valley and above all to learn more about getting through to see Louie before the trapping season. Ray had gone through to the settlement, so Don followed him down there.

Bluff Harbor was an untidy, straggling place solidly held in the power of the big companies that ran the sawmill and the salmon cannery, but without any of the outward appearance of orderliness and modern living that usually belongs to company towns. The prison-like control was there, shadowing the lives of the men and women who lived in the scattered houses, but divided responsibility left both companies free of the usual impulse to make the place at least look happy and reasonably cared for. Don did not see Bluff Harbor in these terms. To him it was the place where one went to fetch the mail or buy groceries, to sell fish or tie up with the trollers and talk. Yet he could sense and dislike the restraints of the place; the trollers and the occasional trappers or prospectors were the only whole,

free men in it. When he met one he knew he could greet him cheerfully and gladly; the others passing along the dull street were different and alien, seeming suspicious of him and his business even when he knew them. So he walked the street and did his business with a conscious pride, holding his shoulders back and stepping out with a long stride that proclaimed him as someone apart even though the *Osprey* was not tied to the cannery float with the bells jingling softly at the tips of her tall trolling poles.

He could not find Ray, so he went down to the *Mallard* when he had bought his stuff and roused Phil Eastey. Phil was tousle-headed and sleepy, waiting out the winter in going over his gear and occasionally running an hour or two in search of the scattered winter spring salmon. He welcomed Don aboard gladly. "Come on in," he said. "What do you know?"

"Not so much," Don settled himself on the bunk. "Gee, you're lazy, Phil."

"Man's got to think sometime. How's trapping? I heard you went up the valley."

Don nodded. "Had a swell trip. Looks like it ought to be O.K. up there."

"You think you'll make her or had I better start looking round for someone else to take the old tub off me?"

"Sure, I'll make her. That's real marten country in there."

"You won't. That's a lousy country and trapping's

a miserable darn business. You won't like it—not after the first couple of weeks.”

“Why not?” Don said. “It's no worse than fishing.”

“No? You walk your legs off and freeze your hands off and live like a siwash right through the worst part of the year, and ten chances to one you haven't more'n paid your board in the end. A couple of weeks in there and you'll wish you were back milking cows.”

“Oh, yeah?” Don tried to sound confident but he knew that what Phil had been saying was a close enough echo of some of the things he had thought himself. “I'll make as much in there in two months as you make dragging trolling gear for six months.”

“What'll you bet?” Phil stretched lazily and began to roll a cigarette. “Don't let it worry you though, young Don. The *Mallard*'ll wait for you up until the end of March; that's when I've got to start finding cash money for the *Kingfisher*. I'd sooner you had her than anyone else, and I'm pretty darn sure I can get my price any time.”

“Thanks,” Don said. “That's all I need to know—that she'll be there and waiting in the spring.”

“See anything of Jetson when you were up the valley?”

“Sure,” Don said. “I saw him.”

Phil straightened up sharply and took the cigarette out of his mouth. “What's that?” He shook his head slowly. “I didn't think he'd have nerve enough to show up this early. What did he say?”

“Not much. Just asked a bunch of questions.”

"Did he act mean?"

"No. He's kind of queer, but he don't seem exactly mean—more like he's scared or worried some way. But it might be he's mean at that."

"You want to watch him. There's some say he ain't right in the head, but I wouldn't be so sure about that. I reckon he's crazy like a fox. If he acts queer that's because he's got it figured acting queer is what's going to do most for Mr. Jetson."

"What's it going to get him anyway?" Don asked. "He don't need my trap-line and I'm not doing him any harm. I can't see it. A man's got to have some reason before he starts in to act mean."

"Never you mind about that. You just watch your step all the time you're in there. Did you get yourself a partner yet?"

"I think Tubby's going back in there with me. He was going to ask his old man about it last night and let me know today."

"If he don't get to go you better find some other guy. You'd go crazy in there alone all winter, even if there wasn't any Jetson."

Don had to pass the Millers' house on his way home and he turned in at the gate to find Tubby. Mr. Miller came to the door when he knocked; he was a huge man, three or four inches over six feet, very broad and heavy, with a red face and a big, straight, black mustache. Don had always been a little scared of him because of his bigness and his great voice, and he was scared now because Mr. Miller was a sawmill man and

meant Tubby to be a sawmill man; he'd likely as not be sore about Tubby thinking to go off in the woods. So Don asked very meekly: "Is Tubby around some place, Mr. Miller?"

"Sure he is. Out back, I guess, splittin' wood." Mr. Miller stuck four fingers of a hairy hand into the tight waistband of his pants. "How soon you figurin' to take him off?"

"Soon as we get the stuff together, if that's O.K. with you."

"Sure it's O.K. with me. Best thing could happen. The way it is down at the mill it's no fit place for a man to work. Tubby's a whole lot better out in the woods, so long as you see he don't lie in bed mornings and get too darn fat and lazy."

Don grinned. "Gee, Tubby ain't lazy," he said. "But we'll be hitting the ball up there, Mr. Miller. We got to make her pay."

He found Tubby back in the woodshed, sitting on a block of wood and whittling away at the hull of a model speed-boat. Tubby held up the hull with the bow towards him and sighted along it. "Boy," he said. "That's a honey of a model. Bet she'd make thirty with a V8 in her and the right wheel."

Don laughed. "You're losing all your ambition, Tubby. Last time it was two Hall-Scotts and she was going to make fifty."

"Sure," Tubby said calmly. "Sure. But a man's got to have a slow runabout for short trips. Don't pay to take the big one out every time you want to move."

"You won't ever get to ride in anything that makes better'n ten, unless it's an outboard."

"The heck I won't. Soon as I can get me into the navy I'm goin' to put in for duty on one of them torpedo speed boats. Those babies can travel so it really means something."

"Navy," Don said. "That's something new. When did you think that one up?"

"Just this morning. What's the matter with it anyway? They pay those guys to be around good boats." He stood up and put the model away on a shelf. "You seen the old man?"

Don nodded. "What's got into him? Seems like he reckons it's just a swell idea to have you go off in the woods."

"He's sore about the union. They can't get enough guys members down at the mill to get recognition. Dad, he's always had his heart set on that and he figured she was going to work out this time. Now he says it's no fit place to work, just a bunch of bums with a dozen or so real millmen thrown in to make the wheels go round; and I can do anything I darn please for all he cares, so long as I buy my grub. That's how I got to thinking about the navy—that and speedboats."

"Nearest to a speedboat you'll see this winter is the canoe," Don said. "How soon do you want to start?"

"Any time you say is O.K. with me. Tomorrow maybe?"

"Sooner the better. There's a whole lot to do in there before we'll be half way comfortable. You come up

to the house tomorrow morning and I'll have everything all set to start right out."

Tubby came up in the white skiff soon after eight o'clock. Don had the canoe already loaded and was standing beside it, frowning and pulling at his left ear. Tubby knew the signs; something wasn't just right and Don was mad. He ran the stern of the skiff up on to the beach and stepped out, ready to approach the situation with tact and caution.

"Looks kinda good," he said. "River's about right and we'll be moving good and early."

Don pointed to the loaded canoe. "Where's room for two guys besides all that junk?" he asked.

"We could maybe make it. One of us could walk the trail round the bad places."

Don turned and pointed back on the bank. "There's the windows and a bunch more traps and all your stuff too. Looks like we'll have to make two trips or else leave a bunch of junk behind."

Tubby felt relieved. "Load half of it in the skiff," he said. "Then we'll be in good shape."

"Yeah," Don said contemptuously. "And pack the skiff around those log jams, I suppose. And work it up through the canyon."

Tubby scratched his head, his big face worried. "Two trips wouldn't be so bad, Don."

"Yes, they would," Don said. "I don't want to see this dump again until we've got some fur. We'll take the skiff as far as the first log jam anyway."

The trip upstream went smoothly and easily for them

and Don felt at peace with himself long before they reached the log jam. It was a cold, gray day after a heavy frost the night before and there was snow in the clouds. But it was a good day for the work they had to do and before dark they were camped under Don's ledge at the foot of the canyon; the skiff was hauled up into the woods below the first log jam, but they had made a double trip from there and would be ready to make the first trip through the canyon next morning. After supper, lying on his blankets under the ledge and looking into the big fire they had built, Tubby said: "You know, Don, this ain't such a bad life. I believe a man could get to like it."

"Why not?" Don said. "A man's free and he's got only himself to worry about. Sure it's a good life."

"I didn't think it'd be so comfortable. I like to move around some, but I never did like the woods because of getting cold and wet and having to sleep out cold and wet—no bunk, no stove, not much of anything a guy can have on a boat. But a man can't kick about the way we've got it right now."

Don laughed. "You wait till we get out on the trap-lines. You'll sleep plenty cold and wet out there."

"No, sir, I won't," Tubby said. "There's no reason we can't fix it to get back to the cabin nights, is there?"

Don settled down into his blankets. "Plenty, the way it looks to me."

"That's a heck of a note. Couldn't you warn a guy before this?"

"Didn't think to worry about it. I've never been so glad to get a start on anything as on this darn trip."

"Why?" Tubby asked. "You got trouble down home?"

"Not me. It's Ellen right now. She's so darn miserable since Ray got turned off that the whole house feels like a funeral. Uncle Joe don't like it either. But that's not all of why I'm glad to get out."

"What's the rest of it then?"

"Heck, didn't you ever feel you wanted to get out without a bunch of older folks under foot all the time? Get out by yourself, see if you could do things your way and find out how good you are?"

"Me?" Tubby asked. "No, I never did. So long as I eat right and sleep right, I ain't hollering." He rolled over on his side and pulled the blankets up round his neck. "You take life too darn serious, Don."

"Skip it," Don said. "Go to sleep."



Chapter IX

IT WAS NOT SO EASY AS DON HAD HOPED TO FIX THE cabin the way he wanted it. Almost everything they did exposed a weak or rotten place in the old building and jobs that should have taken only a few minutes used up an hour or more of patching and restoring. The straight-grained cedar on the slope behind the cabin helped them out of a hundred difficulties; Don split long planks from it for the floor, boards to frame the two windows and make the furniture, and braces for the walls. "It's like having a lumberyard at the back door," he told Tubby. "And all free. Rough lumber, any dimension, any length up to twenty feet. Just holler for what you want."

But he was impatient to explore his country and get his traps out for the start of the season. Tubby wanted to refinish the cabin from top to bottom before starting on anything else at all. "Holy smoke, Don," he said on the third or fourth day. "We've got to live here a couple of months anyway and there's nothing against a man making himself comfortable. It's going to be snowing and blowing and raining and heck knows what

all else before we get out of this darn valley. Besides, what we do this year will be good for other seasons."

But Don shook his head. "No. We'll go up the valley tomorrow. We can do more fixing when we get back, but first of December we got to be ready to go."

Tubby shrugged his shoulders and said nothing. They started up the valley at daylight next morning, each with a load of traps, a single blanket and some grub. It had snowed the night before, a fall of three or four inches, and Don was happy about it. The short, dull days in the valley already seemed to him depressing; the sun, behind its clouds, made full daylight only in the few brief hours between the time it rose over the steep mountains in the east and its quick descent behind the western ridge. But the fresh snow seemed to make the whole valley light and almost cheerful; it was not deep enough to make their traveling difficult and it would carry the mark of every recent movement of game and fur. "It's a good sign," he told Tubby. "A real break, like finding we could get the canoe up pretty near to the head of the canyon that way. When those kind of things happen you know a country is going to be right for you."

Plodding along the overgrown trail behind him, Tubby was less cheerful. They had come only a mile or two from the cabin, but his face was red and sweating and he was breathing hard. "You might have some call to talk about getting a break if we had found a way to get the canoe over that last log jam," he said. "So a guy could go about putting the traps out like a

human being instead of a cross between a pack horse and a bear. You got to be a boy scout to see any good in this darn hiking."

"We got it soft here," Don said. "Wait till we get up a ways farther."

The trail was so bad in places that Don did not bother to follow it closely; he would swing away to where the going seemed easiest and follow his own line until he came again upon the old, overgrown blazes. Every hundred feet or so he struck out new blazes with his ax. "We can put on more later," he told Tubby. "These'll be enough so we won't follow a different way each time."

"Heck," Tubby said. "It's not bad enough we've got to see this jungle once. The guy has to figure a way to make sure we see it again."

"We could do worse easy enough."

"Sure, if there's some place with barb wire and quicksands and a few brick walls maybe. One thing, if I got to be miserable I like to be good and miserable. You're a help there."

From the start Don had been watching closely for signs of old trap sets—rotting sticks set against the base of a tree or the double notch blaze that an earlier trapper had used to mark his sets. It seemed strange that there were so few of them, strange and a little disappointing because he had hoped to be guided by the other man's work. But he and Tubby left their own traps along the trail, spacing them out two or three hundred yards apart, wherever there seemed a good

chance for a set. By noon they were four or five miles up the valley from the cabin. The trail led along a steep sidehill among scattered hemlock and balsam timber two or three hundred feet above the stream. The valley floor was an alder flat a hundred yards wide and perhaps half a mile long. Between the pale slender trunks and bare branches of the alders they could see the quick cold flow of the river in its gravel bed, black between the snow-covered banks except where hidden rocks broke it white. Upstream, at the head of the flat, the valley of the east fork swung off from the middle fork. Don said: "There's what I've been looking for all morning. I didn't think it was so far up."

"Well, now you've found it, let's eat," Tubby said. "This everlasting trail-pounding makes a guy hungry."

Don was still looking down at the alder flat. "That looks kind of good to me," he said at last. "We haven't seen a single darn track all day except for squirrels and weasels. I'll bet there's things been moving down in that flat."

"Holy smoke, we don't have to go down there, do we? Just for tracks. Tracks make poor soup."

"You're darn right we do. Tracks make good soup—when you do something about them. We can eat first if you want."

They ate on the trail and Tubby grew more cheerful. "You know, Don," he said. "This country'd be O.K. if it was all like this—so a guy can see out a little. The creek looks real pretty down in them alders like

that, and seeing up the valley a ways makes a guy feel like he's getting some place."

"Sure," Don said. "I like it this way. But I'm not so sure I figure it's good marten country."

"Thought you said there'd be game down around the flat."

"I didn't say marten. May as well go look anyway, instead of talk about it."

They went down the steep slope to the flat and came on a coon track almost at once, the prints like a baby's hands clear, and sharp in the fresh snow. It followed close to the stream in the short easy hops of a coon's unhurried hunting. Then Don saw the backs of the salmon, red and black backs, humped and breaking water in a shallow ripple, worn white fins outlining the bodies below the surface. "Heck," he said. "I didn't think they'd be able to get up this far." He kicked at a hump under the snow and uncovered the half-eaten carcass of a salmon. "Bear," he said. "Wonder if we'll find his tracks anywhere on top of the snow."

The coon tracks turned off towards the slope of the sidehill and were crossed by a second set of tracks. Don and Tubby held on among the alders, following close to the stream. There was a small log jam and Don went out on it. "Otter," he said. "That's really something. Thirty or forty bucks for a good one."

Tubby was looking ahead through the alders. He pointed to where something had come out of the creek and left a heavy trail cut in the snow. "Looks like that may be your bear."

They came up to the new tracks and Don said: "Elk. Quite a bunch of them. Likely we'll get to see 'em before the winter's over."

"That's one thing you can't get money nor meat out of. They put you in jail and throw the key away if you so much as look cross-eyed at one."

When they came to the end of the flat, Tubby said: "No bear. Maybe the snow made him hole up for the winter."

"It's worse'n that," Don told him. "No meat, no fur."

"How d'you mean no fur? There's coons and otters."

"Marten's what we're looking for. And we haven't seen a deer track since we started out—not a single one. I don't like that; we got to get meat somewhere."

"We'll get it all right. I wouldn't know about the marten though. What sort of country are they supposed to be in?"

"I don't know," Don admitted reluctantly. "You'd figure they ought to be around where there's food, like the salmon in the creek. Then I've heard they hunt squirrels and birds mostly. We got to get through and see Louie before the season starts. Ray and Fred said he'd tell me all there is to know about marten."

During the afternoon they blazed their line on for three or four miles up the east fork and left traps along it. Before dark they had built a rough shelter out at the end of the line, where they slept out the cold night. Tubby's good-natured complaining started with the next day's break. "You're a heck of a guy, Don. You

drag a man out into forgotten country like this and don't pack enough grub to keep the cold out."

"You can eat when you've earned it," Don told him, "when we get back to the cabin and there's a buck hanging under the eaves. Beans and mush is plenty good till then."

By the end of that day they had run a line well up the middle fork and were back at the junction. They built another shelter there, an open-fronted, leanto affair of split cedar, closed at the back and sides but open in front to face a fire built against a big rock. "Makes a dandy place to lay over for a night," Don said. "We should have thought of it before. With the fork this far from the cabin a guy really only needs one shelter for both lines."

He poured himself another cup of coffee while Tubby rolled a cigarette. "You know," he went on, "it's a queer thing where that other guy had his shelters. The whole darn business is kind of queer if you ask me. He had a line through this country we've been in, all right; but the way it looks he didn't set out an awful pile of traps along it."

"You can't be sure of that," Tubby said. "Maybe he didn't mark 'em so good and we passed up most of them. Or maybe he had 'em set back from the trail a ways."

"Then why didn't we come on his shelters out at the end of the line? I've kind of a hunch we didn't go on far enough."

"Sure, we went far enough. Likely the guy didn't

build no shelters. Any guy that's crazy enough to sleep away from a comfortable bunk is crazy enough not to give a darn about keeping the snow and rain off him. It's a wonder to me you've got sense enough to put a roof up. If it wasn't for me being here I doubt you would have." Tubby lay back comfortably in the heat of the fire. Suddenly he began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Don asked him.

"I just got to remembering." Tubby was still laughing.

"Remembering what?" Don felt the laughter spreading inside himself, the way it did when Tubby got started.

"Oh, nothing. Just that time we took the old man duck hunting in the slough and he had that new outfit—boots and coat and shell-vest and gun and everything." The words got out around the laughter somehow. "The solemn way he pulled them big boots up and hitched the straps on to his suspenders. And you handing him his gun out of the pilot house." Tubby paused for breath. "A guy hadn't ought to laugh at things like that, but we hadn't got the nerve to laugh good and hard when it happened, so I guess it's got to come out sometime. You ought to've told him, Don, and it wouldn't have happened."

"Heck, I didn't know any more than you did." Like Tubby, Don was laughing now as he had wanted to at the time. "How's anybody to know a man's going to walk out over the side of a boat into twenty feet of water?"

Tubby was rolling on his blanket, his face scarlet with laughter in the light of the fire. "You didn't know and I didn't know and he didn't know. That's what made it so darn funny. He just walked off like he was going out to get all the ducks in British Columbia and the next thing we knew there was a fine big splash and he was looking back at us over the side of the boat with his hat still on."

"He was a darn good sport about it," Don said when they had stopped laughing for a moment. "And he hung on to the gun as well as his hat."

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with the old man," Tubby said. "He can laugh at himself the same as the next guy when it strikes him that way. Only you can't always tell which way a thing's going to strike him."

They turned into the blankets still warm with laughter and in a little while were asleep. But it snowed again during the night and Tubby woke up cold and shivering well before daylight. He breathed a gentle prayer of thanks that this day would bring them back to the cabin and curled himself up into a tight ball, trying to get warm on the thought. But he still shivered and at last he got up, folded the blanket around his shoulders and lit the fire against the rock. There was plenty of wood and he piled it into a fine blaze and crouched in front of it. The heat reached his body through the blanket, passed around him and over him back into the shelter. He piled on more wood and set water to boil. Over the mountains to the east there was a faint lightness of dawn, but the woods around him

were cold and black in spite of the new snow; he could hear the river in the alder flat, but could not see its movement.

Feeling the warmth of the fire, Don moved and opened his eyes. "Boy," he said. "That's service. What time is it?"

"Ought to be light enough to travel by the time we eat breakfast and get things straightened around."

Don rolled out of his blanket and began to pull his boots on. "Sure is swell to wake up to a fire like that. The way we've got this place makes a peach of a set-up, with the heat reflecting back off the rock like that."

"You sleep like a hog," Tubby said. "I've been cold all night with that crazy idea of bringing only one blanket. Don't know why I was ever fool enough to listen to you."

"I do. Because you figured you had enough of a pack without an extra blanket."

They saw the elk tracks fresh on the snow in the alder flat again and Don said: "We ought to've pretty near heard 'em in the night. I'd sure like to see them sometime."

On the way down he moved a few of his traps a little and settled in his own mind more exactly how and where he would set them. "They've got to be working for us right on the first of the season," he told Tubby. "And we'll have to keep them working to make it pay."

They were almost back at the cabin when they came on the tracks crossing the trail. They were old tracks,

under the new snow, but Don stopped sharply and bent down to look at them. "What's the trouble now?" Tubby asked. "Looks like a man."

"Man is what it is," Don said. He pointed to two tracks side by side at the edge of the trail. "Looks like he stopped and took a good look at our tracks."

"Jetson?"

"How in heck would I know? But I don't see who else it would be. Listen, Tub: you go on to the cabin and get the place warmed up. I'm going to take a look at where these go to."

The tracks led Don up over the shoulder of a hill and down to a rough trail that followed the west fork of the Shifting. After a while Don left the tracks and crossed the stream. He came upon them again almost at once, still half hidden by the new snow but leading downstream now, towards the cabin. Don followed them right out to the cabin, feeling anger growing in him. "Who in the heck does the guy think he is, snooping around like that?" he said, half-aloud. He walked round the cabin to the door and Tubby met him there, a loaded rifle in his hands.

"Gee," Tubby said. "I'm sure glad it's only you. Right after I left you I got to thinking Jetson might show up any time. I even thought he might be waiting right here at the cabin."

"He's been here," Don pointed to the line of tracks leading down towards the creek. "Took a good look at the place while we were away."

Tubby threw the shell out of the breech and put the

rifle down. "The nerve of the guy," he said. "Look, Don, what do you think he's got on his mind? He must have something, and I tell you that guy's not a safe neighbor."

Don went inside the cabin and stood by the fire. "I dunno. Maybe he's just naturally curious. Makes me kind of sore, but I don't know as I give a darn really so long as he doesn't start stealing or anything like that."

"But he's dangerous," Tubby said. "He killed a man once."

"Who said so?"

"Everybody knows it. I thought you knew."

"Let's eat," Don said. "Go on. Tell the rest of it."

"I don't know so much. It's just what people say. He shot a man somewhere down across the line and he's been hiding out up here ever since. That's why he acts queer and nobody wants to have much to do with him."

"What was it all about? Why hasn't somebody turned him in?"

"They say it was a quarrel over a mining claim some place. There's no reason anybody'd turn him in. They figure leave the guy alone. Whatever he's done is his business."

"Sounds queer to me," Don said. "I'd want some kind of proof before I'd pay much attention to it." He spoke as casually as he could, but in spite of himself he was beginning to feel something of Tubby's excitement. The guy certainly had been acting queer right

along, and if he had murdered somebody he might not stop at acting queerly now. It made you scared all right.

Tubby said: "Well, I don't like the way it is. A man's not safe with a guy like that around and I'm darned if I can see why we don't get to heck out of here before something happens."

"Forget it, Tub. You aren't scared, are you?" Don watched him across the table.

"No, I ain't scared. But I don't like being so darn helpless. The way it is now Jetson could knock us off from behind a stump any time he wanted to. Nobody'd be any the wiser."

"Sure they would. The police'd get on to him in no time from the bullet. And anyway, what reason have we got to suppose he wants to knock us off?"

"What reason has he got for snoopin' around the way he does?" Tubby was getting mad and Don felt sore himself—sore at Tubby and sore at Jetson.

"We don't even know it's him," Don said.

"Who else would it be? You know darn well it's him and you know he doesn't mean any good." Tubby's voice was a little squeaky with his anger. "I tell you I don't like it, having to be scared all the time there's somebody skulking behind you. If you like it you stay. I'm pulling out."

"You're yellow. You can't take it."

Tubby jumped up from the table. "I'm not. I'll knock your block off if you say that again, Don."

"Aw, forget it, Tub," Don said. They had settled

long ago which could knock the other's block off and this was no time or place to try it out again. "I'm sorry I said it that way. But it's not like you to pull out and leave a man. This Jetson guy hasn't done anything yet and we don't even know he means to. I'm darn good and sure I'm not letting any old woman's talk scare me off my own registered trap-line."

"What do you figure to do about it then?" Tubby still wasn't convinced.

"Just keep our eyes open and try and find out what it's all about. If there's really something back of it we can always go out and get Ted Harper."

"Still don't make sense to me. Why wouldn't we call Ted Harper in right away?"

"Because we don't know anything. Besides, I like to fix my own troubles so far as I can."

Tubby shrugged his shoulders. "O.K. It's your funeral, not mine anyway—it must be you he's sore at." He looked up suddenly. "Heck, I never told you about Ted Harper and Johnny Drake, did I?"

"What about them?" Don said. "Uncle Joe figures Johnny's the best hunter of all the Indians. He hasn't been in trouble with Ted, has he?"

Tubby began to laugh. "Not Johnny. Johnny's too smart to hit trouble—bad trouble anyway. But you know how Ted is, always getting suspicious of some guy and camping on his trail? While you were in here the first time he got to figuring Johnny was a guy to watch for some reason."

"Like last year," Don said. "When he followed us to see if we were hunting grouse out of season."

"That's right, same idea. And I guess Johnny must have got wise to it. One day he got in his canoe and went up the river and killed a buck. When he was coming back down the big bend—right near the island there, where you go in close to shore—Ted sticks his head out of the brush and says: 'Where you going?'—you know the way he does when he sees you. Johnny just kept on paddling, didn't even look up. 'Back to the Old Country,' he says, paddling away. 'Back to the Old Country. You want to make something of it?'"

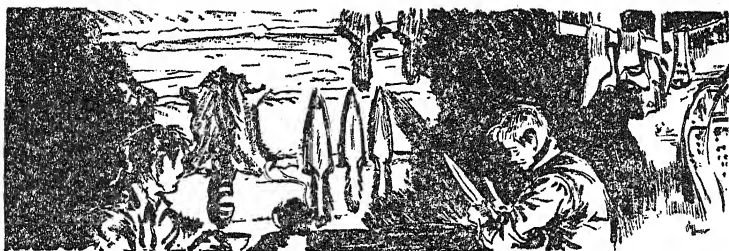
Don laughed. "What did Ted say?" he asked.

"Wasn't much he could say. That's one crack that's kind of special, good for Indians only." Tubby laughed until big veins stood out on his temples.

"You'll bust something one day," Don said.

"Not laughing I won't. Working maybe, but not laughing. Laughing's good for you." Tubby remembered another story and another after that until it was time to go to bed. "What's the next thing we do?" he asked as he stripped off his shirt.

"Get us a buck," Don said. "For all the sign of deer we've seen in the country we've been through so far, we may just as well try it across the river. And we can check up on where those tracks lead to at the same time."



Chapter X

DON HUNTED THE EAST SIDE OF THE RIVER AND FOUND no deer. He followed the half-hidden tracks of their visitor and learned that they swung down to the steep narrow draw of a creek that entered the Shifting just above the head of the canyon. There was a trail along one side of the draw, with blazes that seemed only a year or two old, and Don had to admit to himself, and to Tubby, that it seemed to lead back towards Jetson's country and that either Jetson or someone else made a fairly regular habit of coming over to the Shifting Valley.

Most of this worried Don less than the apparent scarcity of deer. On the east side of the Shifting he had found only a single track in a full day of hunting. "Guess I was a darn fool to try that side," he told Tubby. "A guy might know they wouldn't want to hang over on the north side of a mountain in the middle of the winter. I'll bet the sun don't hit most of that slope more'n a couple of hours a day this time of year." The next day he hunted the slope above the cabin, swinging along it back towards the canyon, and

again found nothing. Tubby had stayed at the cabin to strengthen the back of the fireplace with more rocks and to finish making some shelves. He had supper cooking on the little tin stove when Don came in, empty-handed.

"Holy smoke, Don," he said. "What happened today? Here's you supposed to be a deer hunter, and us starving to death for a bite of meat."

"Gee, I don't know." Don was tired. He had crossed the cabin to his bunk and was sitting there, slowly unlacing his boots. "It's kind of bad. We got to get meat pretty darn soon and we can't afford to put in three or four days hunting every time we need a buck. I can't understand it; there doesn't seem to be deer any place in the valley."

"You'll find 'em," Tubby said cheerfully. "They've got to be around some place."

"They could be yarded up, I guess—all bunched together where there's plenty of salal brush on a south slope. I've heard of them doing that, but I don't think the snow's deep enough."

Tubby began to put steaming dishes on the table. "Come and get it. You'll feel a whole lot better with a meal inside you. I hooked us a couple of dandy trout out of the creek this afternoon so we'd have some kind of meat."

Don closed the jack-knife he was playing with and stood up quickly. "Tubby," he said, "you're wonderful. I'll hunt my fingers to the bone for you."

It was pleasant enough in the cabin now, with a

bright fire in the fireplace and two candles on the table. There was a strong smell of cedar wood from the newly split boards of the floor and the new table and bunks; the wood was still clean, a pale, fresh red color that reflected the firelight in a warm and cheerful way. As he ate Don began to feel better; Tubby was a real good cook. "You know," he said, "this isn't such a bad dump now. It's warm and comfortable as a guy could want. If we just had some skins on the stretching boards and a buck in the woodshed I'd feel fine."

"Season starts day after tomorrow. First thing you know you'll be hollering because you have to sit up all night skinning."

"That's another trouble," Don said. "When in heck are we going to get time to go over and see Louie? I thought we'd be able to get deer pretty near any time we wanted to, and I didn't figure it would take so long to fix this place up so we could live in it. If we're going to have the traps working for us on the first we've got to get out on the lines tomorrow."

"Forget about Louie," Tubby said. "You know enough to be able to catch a few marten. Likely if you saw him he wouldn't be able to tell you much anyway."

Don reached over for the coffee pot and a piece of Tubby's baking powder bread. "We'll have to try it out anyway. Tomorrow we'll go out up the lines and set all the traps. And as soon as we get back down here we'll go on a real hunt until we do find where the deer are."

The trapping season opened on December first. On November thirtieth they traveled over the line from the cabin to the junction, then up the east fork to the shelter, setting the traps as they went. Don made box sets for the most part, setting the bait well back in the deep forks made by the roots of hemlock and cedar trees. Generally, unless the fork was a very perfect one, he would set a few sticks on end to prevent any animal reaching the bait from the sides. For bait they had shot some squirrels with Tubby's twenty-two and when these were used up they had no difficulty in spearing two salmon from the creek with sharpened poles. It was a long hard day, but Don felt pleased and happy at the end of it; he lay awake for a long time, remembering all the different sets, the little peculiarities of ground and position that had made him choose each one. Again and again he had been able to set his trap well away from the snow, in dry powdery ground sheltered by the lean of the tree; that, he knew, was good. And tomorrow they would pass along all the traps on the east fork; it was too soon to expect much, but the thought made him impatient for daylight in spite of his weariness.

The start was very good. In the second trap below the shelter they found a marten; Don held the long body in his hand, smoothing the silky hair, feeling an electric delight in the sheen and rich color of it. "Nothing to it," he told Tubby. "There's twenty-five bucks right there, right in your mitt." But he knew the sense of triumph he had was greater than any sum of money;

it totaled in some way every smallest thing he had done since he first thought of the trap-line. Here, in the first hours of the season, was evidence that he could do what he had set out to do.

Tubby's enthusiasm was controlled. "It's O.K. so far as it goes," he said. "But you've got to do it more than once or twice to make her pay."

"Heck, give a guy a chance. We've only looked at two traps so far."

Don reset the trap and they went on. The next trap was untouched. The next was sprung but empty. There was a squirrel in the next one after that. As they came near each set they were excited and hopeful, trying to see before they reached it if the chain was moved or any of the sticks were knocked down. It seemed no time at all before they came to the junction and turned up to set the traps along the middle fork. Besides the marten they had only a single weasel, a big one, pure white except for the black tip of his tail. Don said about it: "Six bits or a dollar maybe. But he's easy to skin; like taking the peel off a Jap orange." The marten had paid for the day and nothing could change that. Setting the traps along the middle fork, they felt that they knew their business; the way they chose the sets and hid the traps and guarded the bait from sideways approach meant something and every good set was a strong hope.

When they came back to the junction, Tubby wanted to go down to the cabin along the line of traps they had already set on the left bank of the river. Don

had left two or three dozen traps at the junction, meaning to run them out in a line on the right bank, so that they would have two lines of almost equal length to work. "We got to get to that right bank today or we'll never be straightened out. Anyway it's no use going over traps every single day. No trapper does that."

"Suppose there was something in there and it pulled out. You'd be good and sore then."

"No, I wouldn't. That's a chance a guy's got to take. And how do you know you won't lose half-a-dozen catches by going along there spreading man-scent all the way. It's just getting time now to wear off where we went yesterday, and that ought to give the traps a real chance tonight and tomorrow night."

"I guess you're right," Tubby said. "But I'd sure like to see what's in the traps. I'll bet a whole lot we got those coons in the flat—one of 'em anyway." He swung his packsack on to his back. "Gee, but it's a surprise to me the way this racket takes ahold of a guy. It's like having a bunch of set lines out for fish."

They worked slowly down the right bank of the river. Don had been along it once before and blazed out a rough line, but now they stopped to cut away brush and chop steps in the biggest windfalls; they were still less than halfway down to the cabin when the light began to fail. Don said: "We'll have to do the rest tomorrow. Let's hike or we'll be plowing around in the dark."

It was good to be traveling steadily, without having

to stop to cut brush or set a trap every few feet. The snow felt crisp and dry underfoot and the air was cold and still; everything around them was black and white in the half light: trunks of trees and needle-laden limbs, brush and young growth, occasional steep-faced rocks—the snow was molded on all of them to solid shapes by the gentle erosion of the days since its fall. The stillness and the approach of darkness gave the hurrying boys a sense of urgency, made their haste seem to them swift and easy, somehow massive and powerful in quality. Then Don started down a little slope and slid to a sudden stop. He had come upon tracks again, man tracks that had come up the line they were following down, then turned off towards the river. He stooped down and examined them closely in the dim light while Tubby waited. "Rubber boots," he said at last. "With cleats on; likely that red, lace-up kind." He straightened up and looked down the slope to where the tracks disappeared in brush near the river. "That guy's beginning to make me sore. Good and sore. He's keeping tab on us, that's what he's doing. Checking up every time we go out to see which way we've gone."

"What's his idea anyway?" Tubby asked. "D'you suppose he reckons he can scare us out?"

"Darned if I know. Might be anything. But I know I'm getting good and sick of it. If anybody gets scared off this line it's going to be him, not us."

"What do you figure we can do about it?"

Don eased the straps of his packsack with his fingers. "Lay for him. Get a showdown out of it some way,"

he said, and they started on again towards the cabin.

They finished out the short line on the right bank of the river next morning and Tubby said he was going to spend the rest of the day hunting elk. "We got to get meat from somewhere," he said. "If there's no deer tracks in the country, only elk tracks, it's common sense to go after elk."

Don considered this. "Might be O.K.," he said at last. "Trappers and prospectors can shoot meat out of season if they need it, so I guess you'd get by with shooting an elk if you were starving and couldn't find deer. We're not starving yet, but we sure aren't finding deer in any hurry."

"There's no reason anyone'd ever find out about it, and I'm sure hungry for a good steak of fresh meat."

Don laughed. "You get one," he said, "and we'll be eating good all winter. I've kind of got a hunch you might, at that."

"Aren't you going to come?"

"No. Somebody's got to make some more stretching boards if we're going to start catching fur. I'll hunt tomorrow if you don't get that elk today."

Back at the cabin Don took down the marten skin on its boards. He couldn't see the fur because he had cased the skin—taken it off the animal by slitting along the inside of each hind leg, skinning out these and the tail, then drawing the whole skin down over the body and head. The stretching board was split up the center and cut to fit the shape of the skin, long and narrow, tapering off to a point at the end; the skin was drawn

over it just as it came away from the animal, with the fur side turned in, pulled down to its full length and lightly tacked, then stretched by a wedge driven up between the two halves of the board. The hide, as Don looked at it, was clean and smooth, already drying; the marten had not been fat and it was a good job of skinning. It isn't so tough to do a good job, Don thought, but then I just naturally can do those sort of things; they come easy. It's the other stuff that's difficult, when other people come into it—like Aunt Maud and this Jetson guy, if it is him, and even getting up to see Louie. Then his conscience bothered him for thinking about Aunt Maud as though she were the same as Jetson.

He walked across the cabin to fetch a small block plane and a piece of dry, straightgrained cedar, then sat down and began shaping the cedar into a stretching board with his knife. That's something else I can do a good job on, he thought, but I learned it making canoe paddles. Being able to do a couple of things doesn't make you into a good guy though, and I guess I'm just plain mean some ways—like thinking about Aunt Maud just now; and that's why things don't go right. It scares me, not having got up to see Louie. There must be more to catching marten than the way we're doing it, but how in heck is a guy going to take three or four days to go clear out of the country right now, with the season just starting and no meat killed and this Jetson snooping around?

He put down his knife, fitted the two halves of the

board together and held them up to judge the accuracy of the taper. It was good, and he picked up the plane to smooth away the rough grain and round the edges. If Tubby could get some meat this afternoon it would speed things up some—we could maybe even make a trip up to the end of the middle fork line and on from there to Louie's country. But if he comes home without anything we'll have to hunt again tomorrow. There's no two ways about it, we got to have meat and we've got to find some place in the valley where we can be sure of getting it. The only place we haven't looked yet is the west fork, and that's where I'm going tomorrow. The way we've been eating the last couple of weeks is plain haywire—a man can't work right without fresh meat and we're using up the grub we brought in too darn fast.

He started on the second board, thinking of Jetson again. There's no rhyme or reason to the way the guy acts, he told himself, but he must have some idea back of what he does. Seems like he's sizing up what we're doing and where we're going. It scares you to think all the time you're being watched—a man shouldn't have to put up with that sort of thing. He began to think lazily of different ways to force a showdown with the man—go over and face him at his own cabin, wait for him along the trail up that gully on the east side of the river, maybe sight him in the woods and start shooting. You couldn't shoot a guy for just hanging round, but you could shoot near him and maybe scare him enough to make him keep his distance. The trouble was

not knowing what he wanted. Maybe he was a little crazy and just liked to hang around, or maybe he was crazy enough so he'd start the shooting himself one day—that might be the end of it too.

Don reached for another board, then felt his heart leap and the skin of his face prickle as he heard the crunch of a boot on the snow outside. He reached quickly for the only rifle in the cabin, Tubby's twenty-two, and slipped a shell in the breech. The steps came on. The darn fool figures we're both up the river, Don thought, doesn't know I left Tub and came on back here. There was a hand on the door now and Don moved silently to one side. The door opened and Tubby came in. Don lowered the twenty-two and pulled back the bolt. "For gosh sake, Tub, why can't you holler when you're coming? I didn't figure you'd be back before dark."

Tubby laughed. "Now you know what it's like to be scared," he said. "That's why I didn't stay out there alone. I got to looking back over my shoulder so much I was tripping over my own feet and bumping into trees like a blind man."

"Get any meat?"

"No. Took a coon out of one of the traps in the flat, but I didn't see another darn thing. Most of the traps from here up to the flat are sprung though, and the bait's gone. I set some of 'em again."

"How's the coon? Big?"

Tubby slid his packsack to the floor and lifted out a chunky gray animal with a black-barred, bushy tail.

Don took it from him and examined it closely. The fur was long and fine, a clear bluish-gray without any trace of yellow; it was a big coon. "Fair enough," Don said. "Was he dead in the trap?"

Tubby nodded. "Cold and stiff. He did just what you said he would—dragged off that rock and hung down."

"O.K.," Don said. "We'll eat coon for supper tonight. He wasn't bled right, but we got to eat some meat."

"Heck," Tubby said. "Did you ever hear of anybody eating coon?"

"Sure. Old man Engels told me they ate 'em back east all the time. Most animals make good meat—Steve and Ray say you can eat cougar meat and it's just like pork. Beaver meat's good too."

Tubby shook his head doubtfully. "Least a man can do is try a thing once, I guess. I sure put a lot of faith in you, Don."



Chapter XI

"THE TROUBLE WITH US," DON SAID, "IS WE'RE NOT real trappers. We're haywire, we're lazy and we're too fond of being comfortable. Look at this cabin."

"What's the matter with it?" Tubby asked. They were eating breakfast by the light of one candle and the fire. "Stinks of coon grease, but otherwise it looks good to me."

"That's what's the matter. It's too darn good. Windows and a floor and that camp stove and new bunks. If we were halfway men we'd have used her the way she looked and taken the time to learn the country and see Louie and get the traps out right."

"Gee," Tubby said. "I'm glad you told me. There's a whole lot to be thankful for I didn't know about. If we lived any worse'n this I wouldn't want to be living."

"We're soft, that's what."

"Soft nothing. Pioneers is more like it. No, that's not right either; Siwashes. We smell the way they do when they've been up the river smoking dog salmon—all smoke and grease. Boy, we're tough—or crazy or something."

Don laughed. "Tough is right, when a little coon meat puts you out the door on the run. That was good meat. You hadn't any call to go and lose it that way."

"It's the white man coming out in me," Tubby said. "That kind of food may be all right for you savages. Pigs and chickens'll eat it too if you leave it lay around."

"You don't know what's good for you, that's all. A coon is an awful clean feeder."

"Sure," Tubby said. "That's a big help when you know he's been down around a creek where there's rotten salmon." He put his fork down in disgust. "For Pete's sake, Don, lay off that coon or I'll lose the mush and hotcakes too. We can't afford to waste grub like that."

"Never mind," Don said. "Today's the day. We're really going to find something up the west fork."

It was still not daylight when they started out. Don kept well out of the creek bottom, climbing the slope behind the cabin, then following the clear going on the sidehill. They were about a mile from the cabin when the sun came up over the mountain behind them, a bright sun in a clear sky. "That makes it sure," Don said. "We haven't seen a sun like that since we left home."

The west fork valley was narrow and steep-sided and as the morning went on Don's hopes began to fall. There were few recent signs of deer on the old game trails and none on the occasional patches of snow; nothing about the valley suggested that it would be a

better place for them than the rest of the Shifting country. Yet the deer had to be somewhere. Perhaps some sudden disease had killed them all off; or wolves or cougars had chased them out, or there had been a natural migration to some other part of the country. All these things could happen, Don knew, but in happening they should leave some sign behind them.

He stopped at last and sat down wearily on the root of a big tree. Tubby flopped down beside him. "I was wondering when you were going to do that," he said. "You seem to think everybody's got the same length legs and no more weight to pack than you have."

"You know what?" Don said. "I'm beginning to think there must be some place up in the mountains where all the deer in this darn valley go to feed. And there hasn't been enough snow yet to bring them down."

"Could be. But we still ought to be able to find one some place. That's all we need, just one."

They went on, still keeping to the sidehill. The slope grew steeper, broken by rock bluffs and small slides of rock. The timber was smaller and more scattered and a good growth of short salal brush covered the ground. They cut on to a game trail that angled down from somewhere up on the hill above them, then swung along the way they were going; it was worn by the passing of many deer and both boys stopped at once, looking eagerly about them. "This must be it," Don said. "There's something in here that they like." He was whispering and Tubby only nodded agreement. They

went on, quietly and cautiously, hunting now instead of just walking.

They could see out across the valley, over the crown of a narrow belt of heavy timber below them. The floor of the valley seemed wide and flat. A shoulder ran down the sidehill ahead of them and beyond that there was only light and distance. "Must be a lake," Don whispered. "Kind of a big one at that. Darn queer it isn't on the map and nobody told us about it."

Tubby saw the deer first, a two-point buck feeding below them in the sunlight on the open slope. He pointed to it and Don jumped the rifle to his shoulder. Right with the movement the buck raised his head sharply, high, to stare out across the valley. Then he was bounding forward along the slope.

"Crack him, Don." Tubby's whisper was hoarse and urgent. "For Pete's sake, crack him."

Don fired once and saw hair fly. He levered in a second shell, fired again and the buck collapsed in mid-leap, head thrown back, legs folded under him. They ran down and found him slung across a log, quite dead, his neck broken. Don was pale and excited. "What started him?" he asked. "It wasn't us. He was looking the other way."

"Didn't you hear it? Somebody shot. From over on the other sidehill. I heard the bullet hit and then the shot."

"Couldn't be. Must have been a cougar or something in the bush below him."

"No," Tubby said. "I tell you I heard it. I even saw a rock roll down from where the bullet hit."

"O.K. We'll clean this baby, then go take a look." Don slid the buck down from the log. "Boy, that's a lot of good eating." He pointed to a graze in the center of the back. "I knew I was high the first time; didn't lead enough either. So I held right under his nose the second shot. Good as knocking over a honker on the wing the way he folded up."

"It was a peach of a shot," Tubby said. He was searching his mind back over the quick happenings before and after the starting of the buck, trying to hear again the rattle of the rock behind him and the crack of the rifle across the valley. The sounds were lost for him in the deer's sudden jump and the excitement and noise of Don's two shots. But the bounce of the loosened rock on the slide was clear enough; he could see it again and he knew the shot had been fired.

"Don," he said. "Somebody did shoot. And it hit a whole lot nearer to us than the buck."

Don looked up from his work. "Nobody'd do a fool thing like that. Anyway we're out of sight down here. We'll go take a look at that rock soon as we get through."

But they could find no trace of the rock when they went up to look for it and no mark of a bullet where Tubby thought the rock had started from. "Could be there was another deer up there," Don said. "And he moved when I put the rifle up. We better get going anyway. I want to see what that lake looks like."

Tubby was still not convinced, but he said: "O.K., let's go. I don't like sticking my neck out in the open like this anyway. The dirty snake's liable to take another crack at us."

"If this is the closest he could come he better look out for his own hide. We can shoot that good. Another thing, it wouldn't be Jetson; they say that guy can shoot the hair out of a gnat's eye at a thousand yards."

"That's a long shot, clear across the valley like that."

"Sure it is. No man with any sense would try it. Anyway, there's nothing we can do except keep our eyes open. If there's been anybody up this fork of the river today we'll see some sign of him sooner or later."

The excitement and satisfaction of killing the buck had given them both new energy and enthusiasm. The valley looked fine in the sunlight and the sparse trees were a welcome change from the monotony of heavy timber. The light ahead of them through the trees beyond the ridge was a challenge. All the way up to the shoulder the going was easy, through the same short salal under scattered trees that showed marks of fire on their bark. "Must have been quite a fire through here a few years back," Don said. "Then the salal grew up. It's the deer have kept it grazed down so tight. It's a queer set-up."

They came to the ridge and found that most of the floor of the valley was still hidden from sight by the tops of the heavy timber below them. Over the tree tops they could just see a narrow strip of brown swamp grass against the foot of the opposite sidehill. "Looks

like it's a lake sure enough," Tubby said. "Let's go down where we can really see what the score is. It makes me tired having it always one jump ahead of us like this."

Don felt again the thrilling sense of discovery he had known in his first trip through the Shifting canyon. This was his country and it was opening itself to his eyes in unexpected ways that added to his sense of possession. If Ray or Steve had told him there was a way through the canyon, the steep gray walls and secret rush of water would not be his in the way that they now were. Had this new lake been named and shown on a map it could not have been so great a thing to come upon it and get to know it.

They scrambled quickly down the open part of the slope, starting two more deer as they went. In the belt of heavy balsam and hemlock Don looked eagerly ahead, trying to see the first glint of water between the trunks and lacing, needled limbs. Balsam and hemlock gave way to cedar and spruce and alder, and suddenly they came out into the open. Ahead of them was not a lake, but a broad flat meadow, stretching from side to side of the valley and on up out of sight. For a moment Don felt sharp disappointment. Tubby said: "It's been a darn long time since this was a lake." Then, among the dead straw-brown of the swamp grass they saw the more solid gray-brown of feeding deer; four or five it seemed at first, but as they watched the number became a dozen, a score and there were still others. "I'd sooner have it than a lake," Don said. "I'll

bet it's the darnedest place for game in the whole of British Columbia." He was looking straight ahead, his eyes shining. "Boy," he said. "That's really something. Look at them. No wonder we couldn't find them in the rest of the valley."

They stepped out on to the snow-flattened grass of the meadow. The nearest of the deer moved, more heads raised sharply here and there about the meadow, a few white tails flicked nervously.

Near the center of the meadow they found the creek, deep-cut and slow-flowing, but so clear that every stone of the pale blue-gray bed reflected its shape and color up through the water. There were trout lying on the bottom, five or six of them, fat and colored the same almost translucent blue-gray; a little above them lay a female salmon with a great red cock-fish near her. Don pulled a cranberry from a bush and flicked it into the water above the trout. It drifted down, sinking slowly. A trout rose to meet it and let himself back on spread fins, his nose almost touching the bright scarlet berry. Suddenly he seized it, turned and darted a few feet downstream, then came back to lie in his old place. They could see his gills open and close as he chewed on his prize, then the berry was free again, drifting along his side, gently touching the stones below him. Another trout moved slowly to let it pass. Don looked up from the stream and ahead along the broad sweeping stretch of the meadow. On all sides of it the timber climbed the slopes, solid heavy green at first, then white with frozen snow, then dwindling among

snow-covered rock towards the peaks. "Gee," Don said. "It sure is a swell place. It feels like a million dollars to be able to see around a little after all those darn trees."

"Yes," Tubby said. "A swell place for someone to see us too, and take another crack if he's feeling mean. If you ask me anything I'd sooner be back in the timber again."

"Forget it. If there is anybody acting up it's still close to a quarter of a mile from where we are to where he'd have to shoot from." Don stooped down and picked up something from the edge of the water. "Look," he said.

It was a willow stick three or four feet long, with the bark completely peeled away from it and marks of teeth circling the white sapwood. As they walked upstream they saw other sticks like the first one caught up along the banks and then they came upon a small alder, freshly felled, white chips circling the cone-tipped stump. "Bank beaver, must be," Tubby said. "I don't see any dam." They followed a trail of flattened grass to the water's edge and saw the prints of webbed hind feet in the mud. Don turned to go on, then stopped and pointed down at his feet. There was another track in the mud, a big pad mark half-circled by smaller, rounded pad marks. "Cougar," he said. "Hangin' round after the beaver. We ought to get him some way before the winter's over."

They came round a point of high ground and saw another half mile of clear meadow ahead of them, then

a line of gnarled and twisted crab apple trees and beyond these alders stretching back into dark evergreens as the valley floor narrowed again. Among the crab apples the deer were even more numerous than they had been at the lower end of the valley. "I know one thing," Don said. "We don't ever go short of meat again in this neck of the woods. This is a real deer heaven."

"Wonder why they're all over on the far side of the creek," Tubby said.

"I was thinking that was kind of funny too. Say, look—" Don was pointing at the spread hoof marks of a jumping deer in the mud. "That guy was in a hurry. And here's another the same. Didn't happen so long ago either." He glanced quickly among the crab apples about him. "Something threw a scare into them," he told Tubby quietly. "Might have been your pal."

They moved forward cautiously, almost apprehensively. Don felt the whole place suddenly silent and tense, filled with the presence of something unseen that watched them. He glanced over towards the timber, then back behind him, past Tubby. Then some flicker of movement drew his eyes sharply ahead. At first he saw nothing at all, then it was a shape half seen through the grass, then he was looking straight into the cougar's eyes. He stopped so sharply that Tubby bumped into him, but the cougar did not move. Don said "Gosh" very softly and brought the rifle slowly up to his shoulder. He felt himself tight and unsteady and knew that his face was pale and his eyes were staring. He

lowered the rifle and slowly raised it again. The cougar still stood. Don't spoil the head, Don told himself; behind the shoulder's the place; it's a tight shot, the way he's facing, but if I make it I'll fix him for sure. The sights were steady now, right where he wanted them. He pressed the trigger and they saw the cougar jump, turning as he jumped, all four feet high above the brown grass. He seemed to stumble as he landed, then was gone, his long thick tail whirling in a fury of balancing movement. "Oh, gosh," Don said. "What in heck did I do? Miss him?"

They walked slowly forward to where the cougar had been standing. There was a spike buck lying there, freshly killed; the cougar had begun his first meal, biting away the short ribs and opening the carcass. Don pointed suddenly to a drop of fresh blood, still bright red on a blade of brown grass. "I hit him," he said. "Tub, got your watch?"

"Sure," Tubby slowly pulled an Ingersoll out of his pocket. "Why?"

"Give him fifteen minutes; then we'll go after him."

"Why wait?"

"So he'll lie down and stiffen up if he's hit bad. If he's not we won't catch up to him anyway."

"You know too darned much," Tubby said. "Where d'you get it all?"

"Uncle Joe mostly. He told me that one when I wounded the bear that was stealing the honey."

"How'd you see him, Don? I never saw him at all until after you shot."

"I'm darned if I know. I just felt there was something looking at us and there he was. Boy, was he looking at us. Just plain not giving a darn for a whole army of men. Probably never saw a man before. Gee, this is quite a country, Tub. It's like hunting on them plains in Africa I read about once in a book. How's the time?"

Tubby pulled the watch out again. "Seven minutes gone." He had forgotten about Jetson now. "Listen, Don. Ain't it dangerous following a wounded cougar? I know they're supposed to be cowards, but they've sure got the power—I saw one Ted Harper brought into town."

Don tried to show a boldness he didn't really feel. "Guess a man should go carefully, but there ain't much danger, not when you're all set with a loaded gun. Uncle Joe says it isn't right they're cowards; people just say that because they tree from dogs, even little dogs. But he says they can sure put up a scrap when they figure they got cause to. How's the time?"

"Ten minutes."

"Heck, let's go. He's had plenty time to park himself if he's going to."

They stood up and Don checked his rifle to make sure there was a shell in the breech. He was thinking: I must have hit him good. I know darn well I did, if I hit him at all. But it sure scares a guy having to start out cold like this after seeing the way he can move when he makes up his mind to it. It's like an explosion more'n anything else. It'd sure jar a guy to have that jump up

out of the grass at his feet, even if it was headed the other way.

They moved forward slowly and cautiously. Don could trace the cougar's flight easily by the flattened grass. Fifty feet from the cougar's kill he saw a heavy clot of blood dark red on black earth beside a single heavily spread track. He pointed to it silently, his eyes ahead and searching the grass. There was a long-fallen cedar tree ten or twelve feet ahead of him and he stopped to size up the best way over it. Then he stepped forward and stopped again sharply; his foot was beside the cougar's tail. The body lay still and crouched, the head close under the log. He reached behind him, touched Tubby in warning and stepped softly back, his rifle ready. "Plug him again," Tubby whispered. "Hurry."

Don shook his head and stepped forward again. He bent down, gripped the thick tail and pulled on it. The heavy body drew back limply and flopped on its side.

"Gee," Tubby said. "You sure are crazy."

Don laughed a little unnaturally. "I knew darn well he was dead before I did that. It's like old Dunc McPherson always says: 'Dinna waste yere shells on dead meat, lad. Ye'll nae hurt the beast—only spoil yere pocketbook.'"

They looked down at the day's second and greater triumph. The sun was already well down in the sky and Don said: "We've got work to do. And we're going to be traveling in the dark before we get home."

"Fresh liver for supper," Tubby said. A little wind came up the meadow to them, cold and strange in the day's good sun. There were clouds on the mountains to south and east of the meadow. "It's going to rain," he added. "For a couple of weeks."



Chapter XII

TUBBY WAS RIGHT ABOUT THE RAIN. WHEN THEY WOKE on the morning after the trip to the meadows they could hear its steady downpour on the shakes of the cabin and there was a heavy wind in the tree tops. It was still black dark in the cabin and Don reached from his bunk to light a candle. "What time is it?" Tubby asked him.

"Seven o'clock."

Tubby's bunk creaked as he rolled over. "Looks like a day in the hay," he said. "We wouldn't do a darn thing out today except get soaked to the skin."

"You stay here if you like," Don said. "I'm going; I want to see what's in those traps and it's liable to rain for a week anyway now it's started."

They both went. Facing the wind and cold rain in the darkness was not pleasant and they kept their heads down and talked little. Don felt disappointed. He had not imagined that trapping would be like this, against rain and darkness and wind. It was bound to be that way on the coast, he admitted to himself, for some part of the season anyway. But in his planning and expecta-

tion he had always imagined it to be a time of cold dry weather, of sparkling nights and days whose snow-reflected sun would dazzle his eyes. There would be such days and nights, even in a coast winter, but to be going out on the first full round of a brand new trap-line against the wet fury of a southeast gale seemed wrong and somehow dull and ordinary. It was like work, he told himself, like cutting wood on a bad day in the fall or plowing in a raw March wind or trolling in half a gale late in the season. Then, in this last thought he saw the answer; it was work. Trolling was work and trapping was work—arguing that with Aunt Maud he had not always been wholly convinced himself, but now he could see it and know it and understand it fully. Liking a job and the places it took you to didn't make it any the less work; having to do it was what made a job into real work, having to do it even when things weren't exactly the way you wanted them.

They found each of the first three traps sprung, pulled out a little and turned over on its side.

"What in Sam Hill do you figure is doing it?" Tubby asked when they came on the third one. "That's the way those were I found the other night."

Don shook his head. "Darned if I know. Might be squirrels, but I don't think so." He picked up the trap, pressed the spring down with his right hand and spread the jaws with his left. A quick movement of his fingers flipped the tongue over the jaw, he pressed the pan up from the underside and the trap was set again. Don bent down and put it carefully back in place, then

dropped a small stone on the pan to trip it. The jar of the released spring moved the trap a little, but it remained upright and several inches from where they had found it.

"It wasn't a squirrel. Something bigger and smarter than that."

Tubby had pushed his hat back and the rain was running down his broad face. "Jetson maybe?"

Don laughed. "You sure have got it in for that poor guy, Tub. Why in heck would he want to do it?"

"He's acted mean enough so far. If he's snooping around the way he is why wouldn't he spring the traps?"

"We haven't got a darn thing on him yet. Seeing man tracks around the place a couple of times doesn't mean anything." He looked down at the ground. "Sure wish there was something to show tracks today."

Tubby was persistent. "If it wasn't him what was it?"

"Maybe a wise old coon. We'll find out."

But they did not find out. The next three traps were sprung in the same way and Don could find neither track nor sign of any kind on the ground near them. "It's something big and smart," he told Tubby again. "A coon that's been in a trap before, maybe, or it could be a wolverine, except I don't think there's any around this country."

"I still think it's Jetson."

"Jetson wouldn't be hungry enough to take the bait."

"He'd take it so it would look like some animal had been around."

"We'd see Jetson's track some place," Don said.

"O.K., so why don't we see a track from whatever else it is that's doing it?"

"Because it's bad ground for tracks. A man leaves a mark where an animal wouldn't—not one you could see."

Tubby was silent and they went on into the rain. It began to seep through their clothes, at shoulder and knee and around the neck, hardly noticeable at first against the warmth of their bodies, but cold when they stopped and when the wind hit them suddenly at a turn in the trail. There was little in the traps to encourage them. Don set for the otter in the alder flat, on a log that spanned the stream. There was an ermine in the first trap beyond the flat and two more along the line up the middle fork, but apart from these nothing more valuable than squirrels. They came back to the shelter at the junction and restored their spirits with a great fire and a steaming supper. But the rain kept on and the wind with it, and they slept in wet clothes and damp blankets.

Don woke in darkness, but he knew it was near morning and rolled out of his clammy blankets to put life in the dead fire. The wind still roared in the tree tops, shaking the water from them into the rain that fell without pause. He could hear the stream clearly, much more clearly than on the previous evening; close at hand there was the drum of rain and the intermittent spatter of the wind-shaken water on the roof of the shelter, and the dull monotonous drip of water that

drained off it to the ground behind them. It would be good to get moving again, he told himself, and it was somehow good that the storm was so heavy and lasting; it all added up to something near the limit of wretched conditions, worse than heaviest snow or bitterest cold, and yet it was not too bad. A man could stand it for a couple of days out on the line easily enough, and there was the cabin to reward him and restore him then.

He made coffee and woke Tubby out of his restless, uncomfortable sleep. They ate quickly and started out up the east fork line. The first trap, a little beyond the crossing log on the stream, held a big coon. Don killed it and reset the trap. The next three traps were untouched, but Don reset two of them and improved the shape of the box of sticks that led in to the bait. The fifth trap on the line was down in the bottom of a draw, about two hundred feet up a good-sized creek from the main stream. They came on it suddenly, round a bend in the overgrown trail, and Don stopped so sharply that Tubby bumped into him.

"What the heck?" he began to say. Don silenced him and they drew back quietly. "What's the trouble now?" Tubby whispered. "Good or bad?"

Don moved from the trail into the wet brush without speaking. He beckoned Tubby to follow him and they climbed a little way up the side of the draw until they could get a clear view of the base of the tree where the trap was set. Don pointed and Tubby saw something humped and black half hidden behind the hemlock.

"Bear," Don whispered. "Guess he wasn't denned up right when the weather changed."

"Holy smoke," Tubby said. "What's the play now?"

Don raised the rifle and sighted it on the slightly moving patch of black fur. Then he brought it down into the crook of his left arm again. "Go down there and look him over," he said.

"He'll pull out when he sees us," Tubby said.

"So what?"

"He might come at us."

"No chance," Don said. "He'd run like a scared cat." He started back to the trail again and turned along it towards the trap. Tubby followed. The wind in their faces down the valley let them come close to the bear without his hearing or scenting them. Don stopped again, keeping the tree between them and the bear's head, then began to work cautiously over to one side. The bear saw them and drew back sharply, so that the chain of the trap drew tight on its staple and the pull hurt his foot. He was crouched over, his back humped and his little eyes staring at them, and Don could see that the trap had a good hold on his paw. It was a small trap, but Don knew it was well made and had a strong spring. The bear could pull it apart if he wanted to, or break a link in the chain if the trap held, but it didn't seem likely that he would. Don felt suddenly sorry for him—his misery and dejection contrasted so sharply with his size and strength.

"Go ahead," Tubby said. "Shoot him."

"Why don't we turn him loose? We'd never get the hide dried out in this weather anyway."

Tubby snorted. "You couldn't do it. He'd tear the guts out of you if you ever went close enough."

"No, he wouldn't," Don said. "Let's try it out anyway."

"No. That's nothing but a fool trick. If you do get him loose he's liable to come at one of us."

"You can have the rifle. It ought to be easy enough to knock him over if he comes at us."

"Darn you, Don, you always have to do things the hard way. Shoot him now and get it over with."

"We'll waste half the day skinning him. And we'll have to pack that lousy great hide home and have it smelling up the cabin for the next six weeks."

"O.K., let him go then. But I still say it's a crazy idea. And I don't see how you'll do it without getting hurt."

Don handed him the rifle. "Hang on to this and give me the ax," he said. "I'll show you how."

There were some slender poles of ground maple growing a little way up the creek. Don cut one about twelve feet long, trimmed the limbs away and left himself a short pronged fork at the small end. He came back to where Tubby was watching the bear. "Gee," Tubby said. "He's got a slick hide. The hairs must be six or seven inches long and he'd look real good if he was dry. He hasn't moved a darn bit. Just keeps watching."

"He'll move," Don said. "Maybe more'n we want."

He began to walk very slowly towards the bear,

watching him closely. He felt scared now and he wished that the wind and rain would stop so that he could be surer in his movements. The pole seemed suddenly very short and the bear very big and Tubby with the rifle very far away. It's the sort of fool set-up where anything can happen, he thought, and if it does everybody will be shaking their heads and calling us a crazy pair of kids; that's all the sympathy we'll get. But he kept on until the forked end of the pole was within reach of the spring of the trap. For several seconds he stood perfectly still, watching the bear's eyes as they watched his. Then he began to move the fork of the stick very slowly, down and towards the spring of the trap. He shifted his eyes to watch the stick and the bear moved like an explosion. Don took one sharp step back and lifted the stick as though it were a spear; then he saw that the bear's movement had been nothing more than a broken jerk against the trap and the jaws still held him as firmly as ever.

The slow approach of the forked stick began again. This time both Don and the bear were watching it, Don anxiously, the bear suspiciously. Behind Don Tubby bit his fingernails, afraid to speak or move. The stick was very close to the spring; Don tensed his body in readiness to reach up and press down with all his strength the moment it was in position. Then the bear's free paw smashed across, tore the stick from his hands and bounced it against the hemlock tree.

"Darn the old fool," Don said. "He don't want to be loose."

"Why don't you shoot him and get it over with," Tubby said. "Somebody'll get hurt this way."

Don reached over cautiously, watching the bear, and picked up the stick again. He felt less scared now; it seemed clear that any pull on the trap was instantly and sharply painful and there was a fair chance that this pain would be enough to hold the bear from breaking free. It was strange and exciting to be so close to him, to be able to watch the movement of his breathing, to see the bulge of shoulder muscles under the fur, the twitch of an ear or the yellow of teeth when he snarled. But the eyes were what bothered Don; little eyes, watchful, angry, wary and always frightened. Don felt the fear in them hurting himself, making him miserable and ashamed in spite of himself; and he knew the bear had to go free before he would feel right again.

Twice more he tried to bring the fork of the stick near the spring again and twice more the bear's heavy paw swept it away. The third time he managed to set it down on the spring. He reached his arms as high as he could above his head and began to press down, pulling towards him with the lower hand, pressing away with the upper. He felt the spring yield a little, then the bear struck again. The pole shattered into half a dozen pieces and Don stumbled forward, almost on to the bear.

Tubby shouted and raised the rifle. Don flung himself a little to one side and rolled out of the way. He got up, laughing, and saw Tubby with the rifle at his

shoulder. "Don't you do it, Tub," he shouted. "Don't be a crazy fool. Put that darn thing down."

Tubby slowly lowered the rifle. "O.K.," he said. "I wasn't going to shoot unless he broke away. Just the same, it's you that's crazy, not me. You darn near fell on top of him then."

"I know. We'll have to try something else—a guy can't press down hard enough and quick enough from away off to one side like that." He was looking appraisingly at an eight-inch sapling that stood a few feet from the hemlock. "I've got another scheme. If I can get out on that limb up there I'd be pretty near straight above him."

"Yeah," Tubby said. "And what good would that do? He'd just knock the pole for a loop again. And you too, likely."

"No," Don said. "I've got an idea for that." He went up the creek and cut himself a new forked pole, then a second straight pole about twenty feet long. "Here," he told Tubby. "You take this one and go stand behind him and keep him interested."

Tubby looked at the pole in disgust. "Like heck I will. Stand that close while you're trying to turn him loose? I should say not."

"Go up the tree then and I'll stand there."

"That's worse."

"Aw, come on, Tub. You'll have the rifle. We got to get him out of there sometime."

Tubby took the pole with a shrug of resignation. "What the heck's the difference," he said. "I might as

well get killed today. If I don't you'll think up some other way of doing it tomorrow or the next day."

Don got into the sapling more easily than he had expected to. The bear's whole attention was held by Tubby's approach behind him, the long pole held just beyond his reach and sharply moved whenever he seemed about to relax his interest. Don reached the limb he had marked and stretched his body slowly and cautiously along it. He began to lower the forked pole towards the trap. "Stir him up," he told Tubby. "Don't give him time to remember I'm around at all."

The bear looked up towards the sound of Don's voice. Tubby moved his pole and touched him on the rump; the bear exploded again in a short fierce snarl and a jump that brought the trap almost directly under Don in the tree. Don had the fork of his pole on the spring; he pressed down with all his strength, saw the spring bend and the jaws slacken. But the bear had not moved his paw. "Jab him again, Tub, good and hard," Don yelled.

Tubby jabbed, the bear jumped, felt his paw come free and squatted for a moment on his haunches, staring stupidly at it. Don gave a shout of triumph, the bear turned and started straight for Tubby in a lumbering gallop. Don yelled again; then the limb of the sapling broke and he plunged down to land on his hands and knees in the salal brush. As he hit the ground he heard a single agonized cry from Tubby; he bounced to his feet and ran to where he had last seen him. Tubby was flat on his back and the bear was crashing off through

the brush a hundred feet away. Don knelt quickly beside Tubby. "Gee, I'm sorry, Tub. What did he do? Did he hurt you?"

Tubby sat up slowly, moved his arms and legs cautiously. "No," he said at last. "I guess not, maybe." He climbed to his feet, while Don still knelt there looking up at him. "No. Just cracked into me like a runaway locomotive. Guess he didn't even see me."

Don began to laugh. "What's so darn funny?" Tubby asked. "He might have killed me. How did you get down from there so fast anyway?"

Don laughed again. "I'll tell you that sometime," he said. "We'd better fix that trap and get going or we won't make the cabin tonight."

The rest of the east fork line yielded them nothing at all. In the last trap before they got back to the cabin there was a small coon. Don was frowning and gloomy as they ate supper. "We're no darn good, Tub," he said. "I thought we'd really have some skinning to do tonight and look what we've got for ourselves—one mangy coon and a couple of weasels. We got things to learn about this racket."

"Looks that way, sure enough. And how in heck are we going to learn? Might be some chance if there was snow about, but the way it is now a guy can't do more'n guess what's happening."

"I've got a couple of ideas," Don said slowly. "There might be something to 'em. If not we'll have to go call on Louie; that's all there is to it."

"You got ideas, eh?" Tubby's voice was suspicious.

"Such as what? Such as turning a bear loose to knock me flat on my fanny?"

"No," Don said seriously. "Better'n that even. I kind of think maybe we ain't trapping the right elevation for marten. I figure we should run a line straight up the mountain some place, see what elevation we get marten, then run a real line on that."

"Might be something to it, if we was to get marten. And what else is coming up out of the big brain?"

"A line up the west fork, beyond the meadows maybe. We know there's coon and stuff around the meadows and that fork has got all the deer. Maybe it's the best part of the country for all kinds of game."

Tubby poured himself another cup of coffee. His hands were still soft and cold from the two long days of rain, and he could hear rain on the shake roof over him now. "That's one place you can go alone."

Don looked up in surprise. "Why? It's the best part of the whole darn country. Most cheerful part anyway."

"That's O.K.," Tubby said. "I've got my ideas about it and I'm not going up there again."

"What ideas? What do you mean?"

"Just ideas."

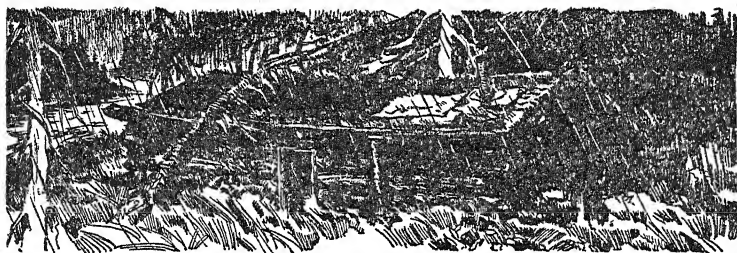
Don got up from the table, crossed the cabin and threw a piece of wood on the fire. He had felt annoyed for a moment, but now he realized that if Tubby didn't want to go it wouldn't matter—in fact it would be good to be up there on his own, traveling his own speed working out his own ideas. But he was still

curious. "It's O.K. with me, Tub, if you don't want to go. But you might tell a guy what's on your mind."

"You know darn well."

"No. I don't."

"O.K. then. That's the place this guy that's hanging around wants us to keep out of. If we go up the middle fork or the east fork, it's O.K. with him; but if we go up the west fork he starts shooting. I guess I can take a hint."



Chapter XIII

DURING THE NEXT TWO DAYS AFTER THEY HAD FREED the bear Don and Tubby ran a short trap-line up a steep slope on the right bank of the river, about a mile below the junction. Then they covered the main trap lines again and found only a single marten in the east fork trap that had caught the first one. Once again the traps were sprung and the bait had been stolen from most of the sets along the west bank of the river. The rain kept on almost without ceasing, earth and brush and clothes became sodden with it and the river rose steadily, building into freshet. Don said: "We'll get cold weather after Christmas and it will be better then," but he felt depressed and bitterly disappointed and almost helpless. He didn't want to go out again over the blank of the main lines and he felt in no hurry to look over the experimental lines—if that didn't do anything for them, he told himself, things would look really tough. But there was still the west fork. He suggested it to Tubby again, as casually as he could.

"Go ahead," Tubby said. "It's O.K. by me if you want to go up. There's plenty to do around the cabin."

"Don't be a dope. We may as well both go. It's time we got another buck anyway."

"No," Tubby said. "I'll go any place else you say and do any other crazy thing you think up. But that's out."

"Don't be a nut. How's the guy going to know that's where we've gone, even supposing he did take a crack at us last time?"

"I wouldn't know, but I'm not taking any chances."

So Don went alone and Tubby stayed down at the cabin to finish building a small woodshed. When he started out Don was pretty well satisfied in his own mind that Tubby had imagined the shot up the west fork that day—in the excitement of coming on the buck, the tension of waiting for their own shot, and then the heavy explosion of the thirty-thirty close at hand, it would be easy enough to imagine something of the sort; and there was the chance rolling of the rock on the slide to offer false proof that imagination was reality. But in spite of such argument he found himself watching the country about him more and more closely as he came near the meadows. Nothing had happened, he told himself, and nothing was going to happen, but there was no harm in putting a little extra load on your eyes anyway.

The wind seemed to have died down during the previous night, but it was still raining heavily. There seemed to be deer all through the timber above the meadows, moving like shadows in the dim daylight under the trees; they kept their distance, but they were

not much afraid of Don. He left them alone because it would be better to kill one on the way out and he did not wish to announce his presence in the valley by the sound of a shot.

Halfway along the meadows he set his first trap, at the base of a big hollow cedar tree that seemed to him to promise marten. He set two more, spaced well apart, in the timber between there and the head of the meadows; there was a good chance they would catch coon, and he was curious to know what else might travel the edge of the meadows. For some reason he felt that this part of the valley was full of game. He had already seen deer and cougar and sign of beaver and coon in the meadows; but the country felt, and somehow looked, used. He had noticed little worn runways in the rockslides and others that passed out through the hardhack; he could hear ravens on the hillside above him. If there was so much to be seen and heard, Don knew there must be far more unseen and unheard. It gave him a queer and pleasant sensation of being watched as he traveled, it made the valley seem rich and fertile and beautiful, even on that drab, rain-soaked day.

In the alders at the head of the meadows he came down to the stream again. The beaver had built a series of dams across it and there were signs of great activity around the big ponds. Though he knew there was a good chance that Ted Harper would give him a special permit if he asked for one, Don had no intention of trapping beaver that winter. But he spent nearly two

hours examining the dams and ponds, tracing out the work trails that led back from the edge of the water to fresh cuttings, noticing the web-footed tracks and trying to judge from them how many beaver there were in the colony. As the pattern of the place grew clearer in his mind he began to feel a proud sense of ownership. He had seen beaver dams and beaver cuttings many times before, but these were his own beaver in his own country and he wanted to know all that was to be known about them; they were one more reason, he decided, for building a new cabin at the meadows.

He was above the last dam, about to leave the alders and start up the hill on the opposite side of the valley, when he saw the cougar track. It stared up at him from the soft, black mud at his feet, rounded and smooth and perfect. He looked ahead and found it again; twenty feet farther on he found the half-eaten carcass of a big beaver. Don felt suddenly and bitterly angry. So they're your beaver, he told himself, and that's the best you can do for them. He bent over the stiff carcass and ran the tips of his fingers through the soft fur under the long shining guard-hairs. Then he straightened himself and went on, following the broken line of tracks across the flat ground. They led him to a well-marked game trail that came down the hill through evergreen timber. Don went to work without hesitation. He felled a small sapling across the entrance to the trail, cut two or three limbs away from the center of it and forced the trunk down on the remaining limbs until it was only eighteen or twenty inches above

the bed of the trail. Then he took from his packsack the largest trap he had with him and set it a little to one side of the center of the trail, directly under the trunk of the sapling and in the gap he had made by cutting away the limbs. When that was done he felt better.

In the cabin that morning he had told Tubby he would work well up the valley, then set out his traps along the stream. But it was already late and he wanted to go back to the cabin along the far side of the meadow. He decided that the cougar trap at the mouth of the trail would make as good a start as any and he could run the rest of the test line straight up the slope of the hill; that would give him two lines working across the contours and two following along a contour. In a week or two it ought to tell some sort of story, he thought, and there'll be time later to run a line up this fork if we have to. He was realizing for the first time the size of his country and the almost infinite variation of possibilities in it; it was going to take time, perhaps several seasons—to know it properly and learn to use it. This season might be a failure, even though there was still time to make it good; that wouldn't matter so much, he told himself, except for the *Mallard*—and Aunt Maud. Aunt Maud really would say her piece, in ways that wouldn't be easy to take; and another summer with the *Osprey*, regretting all the possibilities that the *Mallard* would have opened up, would be hard to take too.

The game trail was well marked and climbed quickly

away from the alder flat. Don set his traps along it, three or four hundred feet apart, and marked each one with two small blazes on a nearby tree. Before long he had climbed a thousand feet or more above the valley and the trail was twisting and offsetting to pass among a series of rock bluffs. The trees were smaller here, but still tall and clean with heavy crowns, and there was little brush—only moss over the rock on either side of the worn surface of the trail. Don was setting his traps carefully, working with a hopefulness he had not felt since they ran the first line up the main river, and he several times went some little way off the trail to find a good set. One set that pleased him especially was at the base of a jagged outcrop of rock, in a narrow crevice that cut sharply back from a worn runway; the bait fitted naturally deep into the crevice and it was easy to bury the trap in the soft moss at the entrance. But the runway seemed so well marked that he followed it out for fifty or a hundred feet and set another trap in the middle of it. As he turned to go back to the game trail his foot slipped and gashed the moss away from a strip of rock. Don scraped more of the moss away with his hand and then, because the color of the rock seemed unusual, chipped a piece of it away with the back of his ax and slipped it into his pocket.

He had only two more traps left in his pack and it was getting late. He set one and went on up the hill to look for a place for the second. Then he noticed suddenly that the trail swung along the hill instead of climbing steadily against it; he could see it for a good

way ahead of him, unnaturally straight and wide and clear of brush. All day long, since the early part of the morning before he reached the meadows, Don had been thinking of animals, of deer and coon and beaver, cougar and marten and squirrels and weasels, watching for signs of them, trying to imagine their comings and goings, their stealthy hunting and killing and feeding. Now he thought: Must be a pile of deer around here to use a trail like that. Then he thought again, looked and saw the slanting cuts of an ax on the brush along the trail. The cutting was fresh, less than a year old, he judged. He glanced quickly behind him and saw a blaze on a hemlock tree, still fresher than the cutting. For a moment he hesitated, wondering what to do. This was sign of men, and the story of their comings and goings would be plainly marked out along this trail, perhaps most plainly at the end of it. He thought of turing back to follow it out, thought again of how late it was and how far to the cabin, and decided to start for home and come back the next day, with Tubby.

He traveled the trail carefully, keeping away from places that would take the imprint of his passing. Very soon he found the mark of the man who used it, the same cleated footprint he and Tubby had found in the snow; it was headed out on the trail, in the opposite direction to the way he was traveling, and the rain had not yet worn away any of its sharpness. Made today, Don told himself, looks like not more than two or three hours ago, if that. Once again he thought of going back; it would be easy to find the man's camp, sleep out near

him and follow him next day. But the trail was a permanent thing, in constant use; and it would be a whole lot of comfort to have Tubby along. Don swung his rifle into a more comfortable position, hitched the straps of his packsack and really began to hike.

After nearly an hour of steady walking he noticed that he was once more on a game trail, ducking under logs and forcing his way through wet brush. Just how far back he had left the man-made trail he was not sure and he thought of going back to look for it. But he knew he would have to hurry to get to the cabin before dark and he judged he was already beyond the lower end of the meadows, so he turned down the hill, picking the easy going until he had crossed the stream and reached the trail he had traveled in the morning. It was still half light when he came near the cabin; the color had gone out of things but they were still visible and recognizable in blacks and grays. He was in a hurry to tell Tubby of the day's discoveries and he called to him. There was no answer and Don thought: He'll be in the cabin cooking supper. Then he realized he could not smell the woodsmoke. He called again as he came in sight of the cabin roof and still there was no answer. Tubby was not in the cabin and there was no fire in stove or fireplace. Don threw his packsack down, leaned his rifle and ax against the wall and went out again. Tubby had the rafters of the woodshed in place and had already started laying the shakes. Don called again and waited, called again and felt suddenly scared and lonely. It wasn't like Tubby to go off anywhere so

near dark. He liked to get into the cabin, light the fires and the candles and start supper, shutting out the dampness and dreariness of the tall wet woods. Don went up to the cedar log where Tubby had been splitting shakes; the saw was there and the frow, and a pile of shakes almost big enough to finish the woodshed roof. Don called again and went down to the cabin. The big pot was full of water and the kettle was full of water on the stove, so he couldn't have gone down to the creek. Then he noticed the stove was warm. He took off one of the lids; the fire had been lighted a short while before and had burned down until there were only two charred sticks left, covered with flakey white ash. Don blew on them two or three times and saw a red glow of heat start up. For the first time he felt really worried. Wherever he had gone, Tubby had not meant to be long.

Don shouted again from the doorway of the cabin, then went to the back of the cabin and shouted again. The woods were empty and silent and it was almost dark now. He looked at the half-built woodshed, trying to judge what Tubby would have planned to do next. Two poles were cut to brace the side wall, lying alongside the uprights; there were none yet for the end wall. Don looked quickly around for Tubby's ax; it wasn't there and he hadn't seen it with the saw and frow up by the cedar. He began to run down the hill towards the patch of small growth from which they had always cut their poles. He could see the white chips and fresh stumps of Tubby's cutting and he called

again, then saw Tubby's shape, dark and indistinct on the ground a few yards away from him in the thicket. Tubby was lying on his back, his eyes closed tight, his face white in the dusk. Don saw the bright head of the ax lying by his side and thought of the cleated footprint in the trail on the hill above the meadows. There was no mark on head or face, only that drawn paleness; he opened the coat and could feel the heart beating, then he saw the great cut in the shoe and the sticky blackness of blood all about it, on the leather and on the soaked, needle-covered ground.

Don felt scared and sick, but he worked fast. First he cut away the shoe with great bold strokes of his knife. The ax-cut seemed to run the full length of the foot, from toes to ankle, and blood still came from it in slow pulsing. He knotted his handkerchief twice, holding the leg up as he did so, then tied it tightly about Tubby's ankle so that the knots pressed in on the arteries. The slow welling of blood stopped. He reached forward, picked up the ax and cut away a few limbs from a sapling, then dragged and swung Tubby's body until he could prop the injured foot on one of the remaining limbs. He knelt beside Tubby and felt for his heart again. "Tubby," he said. "Tub, can you hear me?"

Tubby's eyelids moved a little. "That you, Don? Gee, I feel cold. Where are we?"

Don bent close to him. "Listen, Tub, try and listen. We've got to get you back into the cabin. Think you can make it if I help?"

Tubby didn't answer. Don stood up and looked back towards the cabin.

Nearly four hours later he sat down to eat his supper. Tubby was lying on his bunk, breathing heavily, his usually red face still pale. He had swallowed a cup of hot soup with feeble, awkward movements, then immediately slipped away from consciousness again. Don had washed the long cut and bandaged it; the bleeding had stopped, but he felt certain that bones and tendons were cut, and the edges of flesh lay wide apart in spite of his efforts to bandage them together. He felt he should know some way to sew them together—with animal tendons, perhaps, or even ordinary needle and thread. But he was afraid to try it.

As he ate his meal Don slowly began to realize that he would have to get help—or else find some way to get Tubby out. He thought of going to look for Lee Jetson or even for Louie, but knew at once that either would take too long. Lee Jetson might be out at the end of that trail on the west fork or the man out there might not be Jetson at all; whoever it was might have gone on through the pass or have come out some other way. The trip through to Louie's line would take at least one full day and then there was no certainty of finding him quickly. The best and surest way would be to go out and get Uncle Joe and perhaps one or two other men from Bluff Harbor. Meanwhile Tubby would be alone, with no one to feed him or look after him. He was very weak—Don supposed he had almost

bled to death and judged it was loss of blood that held him unconscious now. Perhaps he needed a transfusion to live. And the cut itself needed a doctor's hands; it might be infected and almost certainly the foot could not heal into a whole and useful part of Tubby again with no more attention than soap and water and ragged bandaging.

Don finished his meal and crossed the cabin to wash the dishes. As he dried them he kept walking across to look down at Tubby and think about him. A man ought to be able to get him out without help, he thought. The first part would be hardest—down along the trail to the log jam at the head of the canyon. The canyon itself would be bad, but very little worse merely for Tubby's dead weight in the canoe; the big question there was the height of the river. Rain was still drumming on the roof, but the freshening roar of the stream was clear in the cabin above the sound of it. The bad water of the canyon would be quick and savage and powerful; almost certainly it would be impossible to portage the falls. Don shook his head; the only thing was to leave it till tomorrow. If Tubby was still the way he seemed now, probably it would be right to take a chance and try it; if he were conscious and stronger it might be all right to go for help. Slowly he began to undress and he realized he missed Tubby. It would have been a mighty comforting thing to be able to argue it out with him, instead of having to make up one mind for two men.



Chapter XIV

FOR A LONG TIME AFTER HE WENT TO BED THAT NIGHT Don could not sleep. He lay on his back, trying out in his mind over and over again each possible way of getting help for Tubby. He went to sleep at last, only to wake again when it was still black dark in the cabin and the woods outside. The rain on the roof seemed heavier than ever and the roar of the river louder. One thing was clear. He would have to make a journey that day, to Louie, to Jetson or to Bluff Harbor. So he got up and began to prepare for it, cooking breakfast and stowing the small amount of stuff he would need into a packsack. Tubby was asleep or unconscious still and his face and lips were pale. When he had the coffee made Don tried to wake him and could not, so he began to eat his own meal. He heard Tubby moving, went over to him and saw his eyes were open.

"How do you feel, Tub?" he said. "Don't move more'n you can help."

Tubby's voice was weak. "Open a window. It's hard to breathe in here."

"There's a window open," Don said, but he went

across and opened the door. He knew it was cold in the cabin and the air was fresh. He went back to Tubby again. "Listen," he said. "We've got to get you out of here. We've got to figure out the best way to go at it, Tub." But Tubby didn't answer; he seemed to be asleep again, and Don knew that he had to make his own decision. He finished his meal and went out. It was still dark, but he used the flashlight and began to do what would have to be done if he were to move Tubby without help. First he found the sled they had made for hauling wood over the snow. It was a heavy and clumsy thing, but it would be good enough to get him down the short length of trail to the river. Don hauled the sled around to the door of the cabin, then took his ax and a few spikes and went down to the river. The idea of the raft had come to him as he lay awake in bed. Getting an unconscious or semi-conscious Tubby over the trail to the head of the canyon would be a slow misery of impossibility—perhaps not impossibility; in time it could be done, even by one man's strength alone, but it would take so long that all the advantage of starting out at once instead of going for help would be lost. But a raft would make the trip almost easy unless there was some bad place he had not seen in the river above the canyon.

Still using the flashlight and working with the dark all about him he found cedar poles, cut them to length, split out cross pieces and spiked his raft together. There was faint gray daylight in the timber now and he knew they must start soon if they were going to start. He

wanted to do it, to take Tubby out on his own, get him to safety without calling for help.

He climbed the trail back to the cabin and went in to see how Tubby was. He was awake and Don heated more soup and gave it to him—those cans of soup were a good bet and they'd be a help on the way out, easy to heat up like that and give to a sick man. He spoke to Tubby, making his voice quiet and calm. "Look, Tub, could you make out here if I went out to get help?"

Tubby moved his hand weakly. "Heck, I can get out. It's only a cut foot. Ought to be right in no time soon as the doc gets a few stiches in it."

"You lost a lot of blood," Don said. "You're pretty darn weak. But maybe we can make it out with the canoe if you'd rather try that than stay and wait here alone."

"I wouldn't stay here alone. I wouldn't—" Tubby's voice weakened into silence and his eyes closed again.

Don took his bandages from the cut foot and washed it again, then put on fresh bandages. The cut looked bad to him, as though it wouldn't heal properly; he wondered if there was so much blood gone from Tubby that it couldn't heal and he wondered if Tubby was just dying as he lay there. It was bad, not knowing more about what went on inside a man's body. Maybe he could live there two or three days without getting worse or maybe he would die; maybe he would die on the trip out—if anything went wrong in the canyon maybe they would both die.

Don could not separate his thoughts properly and judge the thing calmly. He knew now that his mind was made up to take Tubby out. However he looked at it, the idea of leaving him alone there in the cabin was horrible. It would be better to wait for a few days and see if his strength increased; but he might grow weaker instead of stronger and his foot might start to heal in some wrong way. The trip out seemed the least evil; if it went smoothly it would bring them down to the farm and Uncle Joe that night.

Before starting he cut cedar splints and bound them on to Tubby's foot outside the bandages. Tubby was awake again and able to help a little as Don carried him out to the sled. The rain had stopped, but Don piled on all the blankets and covered them over with the tent fly he had brought in to patch the roof on the first few nights. It would rain again, he felt sure, and he knew it was important to keep Tubby as dry and warm as possible.

Dragging the sled down the trail, he could not see Tubby's face and he had time to think again of what he was doing. It was bad, leaving the traps all set out, but then they hadn't been catching much and they might not catch much while he was away. It was best to forget about them and keep thinking of what had to be done. The log jam at the head of the canyon was the worst thing and no matter how he tried he could think of no easy way around it; once they were past that and in the canoe the rest would be easy—there might be bad places in the canyon, perhaps even im-

possible places, but it would not be in his power to make decisions or plan ahead for these; each would have to be faced and beaten in the split second of time between its appearance ahead of them and disappearance behind them. From here the log jam loomed big and black and difficult and, this side of it, there was the lesser problem of moving Tubby from sled to raft and the unknown possibilities of the few reaches of the river he had not seen from the trail.

He got the sled to the bank of the river at last and saw his raft in daylight for the first time. It wasn't a bad rig, he told himself; at least it floated high and light in the water and there was a chance that Tubby would still be dry and warm when they reached the log jam. Moving him on to the raft was almost easy, because he seemed strong enough to help himself again. When he was on the raft and covered up, Don said: "How do you feel, Tub? Do you think you'll get stronger maybe, and we'd do better to wait awhile before we try it? We can still go back you know."

Tubby didn't answer and Don looked at his face. It was terribly pale and his eyes were closed. Don reached in quickly and felt for his heart and found it still beating. "Tub," he said. "Can you hear me?" But Tubby still didn't answer and Don felt a great loneliness. The rush of the river was harsh and cold and unfriendly; the dark trees were silent and grim and the whole country seemed overwhelmingly big and uncaring. He wanted to shout at it, to force some answer out of it, tear from it some shred of assurance that what

he was doing was right. But it was silly to shout at empty hills and silent trees and he didn't do it. He looked back at the cabin once, then picked up his pole and pushed the raft out from the bank. The racing current caught it instantly and drew it on, and Don had no more time to think.

In flood the Shifting was a big river, high and strong over her rocks and gravel bars. Don was glad of that as the raft slid on between the tall green banks—it meant a steady, almost smooth pull of current and a reasonable certainty that he would be able to avoid grounding. He had little control over the raft, but it rode down swiftly and he began to feel that they would come down to the jam without trouble. He was standing straight up on the downstream end of the raft, his legs well apart for balance, the pole in his hands. In the thrill of the heavy water he almost forgot Tubby and looked round at him only occasionally. He began to sing, loudly and satisfyingly, letting his voice roll in with the sound of the water about him. Ahead he could see that the river curved sharply under a steep white clay bank. He worked the raft over, rode the jolting drive of the broken water in the curve, straightened the raft with a thrust of his pole against the bank and lowered the tone of his voice to match the quiet gurgling and sucking of the deep water. There was a bend again at the end of the clay bank and the harsh sound of a new rapid was loud beyond it. The raft slipped over the tail of the long pool and he flexed his knees to take up the shock of the broken water. Then he saw

the log, huge and black, stretching across from bank to bank, the underside of it almost touching the surface of the water.

Don swung around instantly and faced upstream. He thrust down with his pole, felt it jar on a rock and slide off. He thrust again, found bottom, threw his weight on the pole for a fraction of a second, released it before the weight of the raft in the current could force his grip, drove it down and found bottom again. He repeated the movement a dozen times, forcing the raft into the slower current behind the bend and slowing its speed. But they were still moving downstream and the log was less than twenty feet away; Don drove the pole down and held until he felt salt sweat in his eyes from his forehead and the sweat from his chest and shoulders was cold on his belly. He recovered the pole and drove it down again. This time he held the raft, moved up on it a little and forced it against the stream. He swung the nose in and grounded it behind the shelter of a salmonberry thicket.

He felt the muscles of his arms and shoulders quivering from the strain and his knees were weak, but he was afraid of delay and jumped ashore as the raft touched. He carried Tubby up on dry ground, made him comfortable there, then went back to the raft and took a length of quarter-inch line from the packsack. He tied the line to one of the crosspieces of the raft, and then, because he wasn't sure of the spikes, put a timber hitch on one of the cedar poles as well. It took him only a minute or two to carry the end of the line

along the bank, pass it under the log and make it fast to an alder on the downstream side. He went back to the raft, stepped out on it and pushed off from the bank. As the current took the raft again Don checked it carefully down on the pole until it was just above the log. Then he moved his feet back until his weight was on the downstream end of the poles, forcing them down to the surface of the water, let the raft under the log and stepped forward as he did so. The first cross piece caught, but he forced it under, bracing his shoulder against the curve of the log. He did the same thing with the second crosspiece and jumped to the log, pole in hand, as the raft swept under and free on the lower side. He watched it come up with a heavy jerk on the line and sighed with relief when the line held.

Getting Tubby around through the brush and back on to the raft was slow and difficult, but he made it at last and they went on down without difficulty to the big log jam. It was raining heavily again and the wind was strong down the valley, shaking water from the tree tops. The water of the river surged and foamed against the upper side of the log jam and sounded noisily in its broken fall among the logs. Don felt afraid, afraid of the heavy task of carrying Tubby over the jam. But he knew fear was useless to him and he refused to weigh it or even recognize it fully; there was nothing to do but go on, feeling small and helpless and alone, strained by the task, dwarfed by the powers against him, yet shut into the sweating urgency of his own small effort.

He had climbed on to the jam, carrying Tubby with a fireman's lift, and he was making his way across and along the tangled logs. Tubby was heavy and awkward on his shoulders; a dozen times he almost lost his balance and fell between the logs; once he slipped and only saved himself by flinging Tubby's body across a log as he went down. He rested then and the fear came in on him as he waited. He had to pick Tubby up and go on again and his legs were quivering with strain and weariness and his body felt suddenly cold and stiff and it was still an impossible distance of toil and torture to where the canoe was waiting. You could leave him here, he told himself, fix him comfortably some way and go for help. It's the best thing to do. But he knew it would be a botched job then, neither one thing nor the other; there could be no excuse for leaving a man out on a log jam in the pouring rain when you could as well have left him in the comfort of a dry cabin.

He picked Tubby up and went on again and the fear and sense of his own smallness left him. The rain and wind were big and strong over him, the river was powerful and savage under him, mountains and trees and rock walls of the canyon were huge all about him; but only he, Don Morgan, was truly alive in all of this and only what he was doing was real and important; storm and flood were old things in the valley, things that passed and came back again and again and made little difference to any man. But Tubby's life was in the strength of his legs and shoulders, in the sureness of his feet on the logs; and the close effort of his progress,

the struggle to balance and climb and drop down and climb again, was the biggest thing of all.

He was almost surprised when he came to the end of the jam and found himself thankfully launching the canoe. He lowered Tubby into it with difficulty and went back for the blankets and tarpaulin. As he packed them around him he began to worry again that Tubby might die on the way down; that was foolish, he told himself, and there was nothing to do anyway but go on. The water of the first run was heavy and fast but almost smooth from its new depth over the rocks; the canoe was a light and pleasant thing to handle after the clumsy raft and whatever was ahead in the canyon was inevitable now—there was a chance to get Tubby through that way and no chance any other way. Don started almost happily and as the canoe gathered speed he began to sing again.

The canoe came out of the first run and into the twisting narrow way of the canyon proper. Don stopped singing and raised himself on his knees. He kept his eyes well ahead, straining to see what was coming, letting his hands and arms do what was necessary to meet the difficulties about him. He felt breathless, but not frightened. The force of water was greater than anything he had known before, tossing the canoe wildly where a ledge of rock broke it into waves, drawing it in smooth speed through the long reaches that were pools at low water. He saw the right angle turn ahead of him and drove the canoe towards it, building steerage way for the quick movement that must hold



*There was a chance to get Tubby through that way and
no chance any other way*

them off the rock wall. The roar of the water was all about him between the walls of the canyon and he felt his eyes staring, his muscles tense. He started his turn a moment too soon, felt the gunwale of the canoe dip, saw the racing water level with it and flung his weight over. He drove his paddle deeply and strongly, drew it out and drove again as the canoe slid sideways towards the rock wall. The wall was suddenly over him and he felt his hand, holding the paddle, come against it. He swung the paddle across and backed water on the outside, crossed it again and thrust to drive the stern out. The canoe scraped along it, almost upset, and then was free. Don saw that the back of his right hand was covered with blood, but there was strength in it and he did not worry. He began to think of the falls, and again he was not worried and not scared; he remembered how easily he had decided it would be possible to run them on high water; he was not so certain now, but he had to run them or attempt the impossibility of carrying Tubby up some crevice in the canyon wall.

He looked at Tubby for the first time since they had started the run and saw that his eyes were open. Tubby smiled weakly when he saw Don looking at him and tried to lift his head.

"Boy," he said. "It sure looks some trip from down here. How're we coming?"

"Fine," Don said, and realized that his voice was uncertain and the palms of his hands were sticky with sweat. "It's a whole lot easier than I thought it'd be.

You just lie still and don't try talking too much. We'll be home before dark."

Tubby's face was suddenly tired again. "Sure wish I could help," he said. "Sure wish I could see it all. But it don't seem I've got any strength." His eyes closed and he didn't talk any more.

Don saw the crook-butted cedar on the canyon wall and could hear the roar of heavy water beyond it. There was no spray from the falls, but the crests of three great, back-curving waves showed white and sharp beyond the drop. His heart seemed high in his chest, almost choking him, and he could feel sweat all over his body. He rose a little on his knees and headed the canoe straight for the center of the taut glassy curve of the breakover. The pull of the gathered water was sudden and tremendous; the first wave came at the bow of the canoe, broke over it and smashed hard into Don's chest and face. He gasped in the sudden cold, forced his paddle down and caught the second wave a little off center. The canoe quivered and was sluggish under him with the weight of water in it, but he swung it still more and met each lessening wave more easily. They came out on to smooth water and almost at once a great white boil of foaming bubbles broke hissing at the side of the canoe, lifting it and forcing it towards the wall of the canyon. Don drove the canoe forward, clear of it and into a whirlpool that swung the canoe end for end; he backed out of that, met another boil, straightened the canoe—then they were clear of the canyon.

Don forced the canoe over into the eddy and sat back on his heels. The worst of it was over now; nothing much could go wrong between here and the farmhouse and the only tough part of the job would be getting Tubby round the log jams. But he knew suddenly that it was later than he had thought, that they could not possibly reach the main river before dark. He looked at Tubby and saw he was still asleep or unconscious. There was water in the bottom of the canoe, making it sluggish and heavy, soaking into Tubby's blankets, deep about his own numb, cold knees and legs. He tipped the canoe and bailed the worst of it out—it was quicker and easier to do that than go ashore, move Tubby, and dump the canoe—then started on downstream again. He portaged the first small log jam in three trips without difficulty and noticed as he tucked the damp blankets under Tubby that the light was already failing. He began to hurry, picking always what seemed the largest of the many branching channels of the river. It was a swift, easy trip on the high water and he felt good in spite of the urgent haste that kept his tired arms working.

The trouble came very suddenly. The canoe rode fast down a straight run of swift water. Don drove it round a bend and saw the log jam fifty feet ahead. He swung sharply towards the bank, felt a jarring crash that heeled the canoe far over on the downstream side. Without hesitation he jumped out and grabbed the pointed stern. For a moment he floundered, seeking a footing on the bottom against the strength of the cur-

rent. Then he was standing, holding the canoe feet short of the jam, water pouring over his shoulders. He had to hold. If the canoe went on it would sweep under the logs and upset and Tubby must be drowned. Very carefully he began to move towards the bank. Twice he stumbled and lost ground, but he reached shallower, more sheltered water at last. The canoe was half full of water and Tubby was awake in his sodden blankets. Don worked the canoe over to the bank and got Tubby out.

"Gee," he said. "That was close."

Tubby smiled. "What you don't know don't hurt you, I guess. What happened?"

Don told him, working to get the worst of the water out of his clothes and blankets as he did so. Then he went back to the canoe. It was full of water, right up to the gunwales. Don hauled it out and saw that the snag that had hit had torn a great hole along one side of it. He felt a sudden, shocked sense of guilt and looked quickly back to where Tubby was lying. Tubby was still and could not see him, and he felt glad because he wanted to cry. He tried to let himself cry, told himself it was all right to cry all he wanted because there was nothing else to do; but the tears wouldn't come and he just stood there, savagely angry with himself and with the luck that had turned against him so late.

He took the ax out of the wrecked canoe and went back up the bank to look for dry firewood. He thought of trying to repair the canoe and knew it would take

too long. He thought wildly of trying to carry Tubby out the rest of the way and knew it was impossible. He had to go for help and leave Tubby there alone for many hours; and when they came back Tubby would be dead and it would be his fault, his carelessness that had killed him. Then he thought of the skiff below the last log jam. The thought gave him all the strength of fresh courage. He began to work as though it were the start of a new day, building a fire, cutting a good reserve of wood, settling Tubby as comfortably as possible in the half shelter of a leaning fir tree, heating soup for him, making him understand where the dry firewood was piled and that he must keep the fire going. It was dark when he had done all there was to do. "I'm going to bring the skiff up. I ought to be back inside a couple of hours," he told Tubby. "There'll be nothing to it then."

"Take your time," Tubby said. "I may be no good for anything else, but I'm in shape to do a tall pile of waiting." His eyes looked pleadingly up at Don in the firelight. "Gee, Don, I sure feel badly about being such a weak sister. I've loused the whole darn business up for you now. I'll make it up to you some way though."

"Don't be a nut," Don said. "You couldn't help what happened." He waited a moment. "I'm going now. Keep that fire in."

He tried to follow the stream at first, but the brush was very thick and he made slow time, so he swung across towards the sidehill. He came to a flooded channel of the river, swam it without hesitation and

plunged into thick brush again. Within fifty yards he came on another flood channel, then a third and a fourth. He lost count after that and didn't care, but plunged on in darkness towards the sidehill. There was sound of wind and water all about him, he was soaked with water and tired with water and his body was soft and cold from it. Then there was a stretch of still water ahead of him, how wide he could not see, but he sensed the bulk of the sidehill across it. He put a foot in and felt for bottom, found none, plunged in and began to swim. Suddenly he was scared. His boots were heavy and his clothes dragged at him and he knew he might not be swimming straight. He wanted suddenly to stop swimming, to lie quite still and sink down to the bottom to rest. Then his hand struck on reeds and mud. He pulled himself forward, found the bank and lay there.

The rest was almost easy. The skiff was heavy and awkward after the canoe, but he found he had strength to carry it. Poling back in the darkness he realized the danger of choosing a wrong channel, but a moon somewhere behind heavy clouds gave him light enough to pick always the one that seemed larger, and he came at last to a log jam. He ran the skiff ashore, stepped out and almost at once saw the reflected light of Tubby's fire. As he came close he saw the dark figure of a man bending over it and stopped sharply. He heard the man speak and saw him turn towards Tubby. For a moment longer he hesitated, then went forward into the light of the fire. The man looked up and Don saw it was Jetson.

"Did you get the skiff?" Jetson asked. "I didn't think you could make it back so soon."

"Sure," Don said. "I got her. She's right there below the jam." He pointed to where Tubby was lying in the blankets. "How does he look to you?"

"He'll do. I fixed some more soup for him and he's warm. You did a good job on that foot."

"Let's get going," Don said.

"You better eat first," Jetson pointed to bacon and beans in a frying pan and a coffee pot beside it. "It's still a long trip out." He filled a plate, then poured coffee and handed them both to Don. Don took them gratefully and began to eat. He was very hungry.

After a little, he said: "How did you know to look for us?"

"I'm here, ain't I?" Jetson said. "You should worry about how come. Just figure it's lucky you left a good fire."

Don thought: That's only a part of it, not a very darn big part either. But he was tired and he wanted to get started again. "Will you give me a hand as far as the last jam?" he asked.

"Sure," Jetson said. "That's what I came for."

They made the run down between the jams with all three of them in the skiff. When they had carried round the last jam and put Tubby back in the skiff Don turned to Jetson. "Coming on down?" he asked.

Jetson shook his head. "You'll be all right now. You ought to be home in an hour or so."

Don held out his hand. "Thanks a lot. I guess if you

hadn't come when you did we might not have made it."

"The way you were going you'd have made it all right," Jetson said.

Don stepped into the skiff and pushed off. In a few minutes now he would be on his own river. A little while after that he would be with Uncle Joe, and Uncle Joe would know the answers from there on. Tubby was safe.



Chapter XV

IT WAS TWO DAYS AFTER THE JOURNEY DOWN FROM Shifting Valley that Don walked into the kitchen at the farmhouse; he had been down to the hospital at Bluff Harbor to see how Tubby was after the first few hours of proper treatment and care. The whole family was in the kitchen—Uncle Joe, Aunt Maud and Ellen. Uncle Joe asked: "How is he?"

"Doc Hale says he'll make out fine," Don said. "The foot won't bother him and it ought to heal fast. It was just the blood that went out of him made him so weak, but the doc says he's plenty strong enough to take care of that now."

Uncle Joe nodded. "You called it right. That was smart. You sure took a chance though, doing it all yourself instead of going for help."

Aunt Maud turned away from the stove. "I suppose it wouldn't have been taking a chance to leave the poor kid in there all alone and use up two whole days more taking help back and bringing him out. There had to be a chance taken one way or another."

"True enough," Joe said. "But Don would have

taken a whole lot more blame if Tubby had died on the way out."

"Don knew that," Ellen said. "Didn't you, Don?"

Don felt grateful to her. "I guess so. I did an awful pile of figuring about it, but I just couldn't see leaving him in there alone."

Aunt Maud turned round again. "Of course not," she said. "It was a real man's choice and I'm proud of you, Don. There's a whole lot more to you than I ever thought there was."

Don looked at her in surprise. He couldn't understand this sudden change, Aunt Maud defending and Uncle Joe criticizing. Then Uncle Joe said: "That's what I've been trying to say. Don was really up against it. He had to make a decision all on his own and he made the right one. It would still have been the right one even if the breaks had gone against him, but there would have been plenty to criticize it. Don's knowing that and still playing it the way he did is what makes it good."

Ellen began setting the table and Aunt Maud opened the oven door and looked in at the roast. "I still think it isn't right, letting two youngsters go off on their own like that," she said. "But if they can do so well there isn't much for me to say."

As they sat down at the table, Joe Morgan said: "What are you going to do now, Don?"

"I've got traps set up there. I ought to get back to them."

"You couldn't stay down and help me with one of

our troubles? It'd give you a chance to be quite sure how Tubby's making out."

"What trouble is it? The traps haven't been catching much, but it isn't right to leave them."

"There's a cougar around and I'm afraid he's going to start on the cattle; he's been sneaking round them at nights."

"I wouldn't do much without dogs. I couldn't go after him as well as you could, Uncle Joe."

"There aren't any dogs around. We thought we could get Ray and his dogs, but he's gone off to one of the islands."

"Ray?" Don said. "When did he get dogs?"

"He's got a steady job now," Aunt Maud said. "He's a whole time government hunter."

Don saw that Ellen was smiling and looking down. Things sure have changed in a few weeks, he thought; Ray's a white-haired boy all of a sudden and I'm not in Dutch either. "I still don't see I could do much," he said. "Unless I could figure out a trail set with those big traps in the barn."

"I'd like to have you try it," Joe Morgan said. "I've promised to help Jack Marsh with his butchering and that will take all my time for the next couple of weeks. I'm afraid if something isn't done about him that cougar's liable to get started on the calves or on your aunt's chickens."

Aunt Maud looked at Don and smiled. "Stay down, Don. A few days won't do any harm and anyway, I

don't like to think of you going back up there so soon all alone."

"Stay down," Ellen said. "You can go back in the day after Christmas."

It was all strange and new and very pleasantly flattering and Don stayed. He tried not to admit, even to himself, that it would be lonely up the valley without Tubby or that he felt discouraged about the trap-lines and was a little glad of an excuse to be away from his difficulties for a while longer. It would be nice to be home for Christmas and somehow the idea of hunting a cougar over the trails and pastures he knew so well appealed to him strongly.

He went out next day and Ellen came with him. They followed the wagon road as long as it kept close to the river and when it turned away they left it for the old trail that held to the bank right down to the sand flats and islands at the mouth. Don liked to be with Ellen; she didn't talk too much and she walked like a man, quietly and with good, long, smooth strides. She was pretty too, he told himself, and you could see how a man like Ray would fall for her. As they went along the trail he asked her: "Will you go off in the woods with Ray when you're married to him?"

"Wait and find out," Ellen said without turning round. "We aren't married yet."

"But will you?"

"Of course, if he asks me to."

"It's nice in the woods with two of you," Don said.

"You talk and get to like each other and know about each other."

Ellen stopped and looked at him in surprise. "Gee," she said. "You've changed, Don. Everything's better with two people, if they're good to each other. But you always liked to go alone."

"I know," Don said. He hadn't meant the conversation to turn back on himself. "Plenty of things seem changed. Aunt Maud kind of goes for Ray now he's working for the government instead of himself. I guess you two'll get hitched pretty soon now."

"In the spring sometime. We always would have, but it's better to have Mother liking it. Mother's kind of changed her ideas about you this last little while too."

"You mean she thinks it's O.K. for a guy to make his living trapping and fishing?"

"Not exactly. But she seems to like the way you go about it—so far. I heard her tell Dad you're serious about it and you work at it. If you make good this winter and finish up enough ahead to buy the *Mallard* and go fishing next season, it's O.K. If not he's supposed to tell you to go work in the mill."

"So that's the way it is." Don laughed. "I guess I'll have to do a whole lot better than we've done so far if I'm going to stay free. For a start, maybe we'd better get this cougar, then I can step on it and get back up the valley."

"What makes you think he's down this way?" Ellen asked. "I thought you'd start out up the river."

"Just a hunch," Don said. "I figured if he's hanging round the cattle that way he might be a beachcomber—an old one that can't hunt good and has to look for an easy living like clams and wounded ducks and maybe dead fish. I'd better go ahead of you from here on in case there's any tracks; I'm more used to watching for them than you are."

They followed the trail out to its end at the mouth of the river and found nothing. The tide was far out and Don turned on to the flats. Mallard and widgeon rose in front of them and flew off on quick wings into the clear sky. Goldeneyes swung back over the line of the river channel to join the American mergansers, and a peregrine falcon dropped from a tall tree on the far bank to chase the first flock down to the water in savage play. "Sure wish the bad weather would have held a day or two longer," Don said. "I'd have liked to come down with the shot gun. But she'll freeze tonight and stay that way till I go."

The soft wet sand of the flats was crossed and recrossed everywhere by coon tracks. Don stopped beside a shallow tidal pool and lowered the packsack from his shoulders.

"What now?" Ellen asked him.

"Coon traps. I guess my hunch wasn't so good. I figured it might not be and there's no sense to wasting a whole morning." He took two small traps out of the packsack, each with a piece of mirror wired to the pan, set them and put them down under two or three inches of water near the edge of the pool.

"What are those meant to do?" Ellen asked.

"There'll be a moon tonight. When the coon come out they'll see the reflection of it in the mirrors and dab at it with their paws. It's a good rig."

"Don," Ellen said. "Do you really like trapping?"

Don didn't look at her. "Sure I do. Why not?" he said quickly. "We'd better move on and find another set."

He set four more traps in the wide bay below the mouth of the river and that brought them to where a rocky point ran out clear to the tide even at low water. Don told Ellen to wait for him, then climbed up over the bare rock and into the low salal and scrub timber above tide-mark. He knew the runways where the mink came down along the point to their nightly feeding and in ten or fifteen minutes he set four traps, hiding each one with a light covering of dry moss at a worn and narrow place in a well-used runway. He came out to the beach again and sat down beside Ellen. "It's a swell day," he said. "We may as well eat here, then cut through to the road and home that way. If there's no sign of the cougar along there either we can be pretty darn sure he's up the river."

"How do you think you'll get him if he is up that way?"

Don shrugged his shoulders. "Trap, I guess—if I get him at all. A man can't do much without dogs."

"Ray and Steve and George got over thirty in traps up at the lake last season."

"I know. They were thick up there and they got

most of them with trail sets, but it's not the same when you have to go after one special one like this."

"What does an animal act like when he's in a trap and you come up to him?"

"Different animals do different things. Most often they are scared—I guess they all are, but some get set to put up a scrap. And very often they're dead when you get there—mink and marten especially."

"If they aren't dead you have to kill them?"

"I don't know who else would."

"Why can't they invent a trap that kills animals right out? It seems like an awful lot of agony for a few furs."

"They've tried," Don said. "But they don't seem able to make the grade. Maybe they'll work it out one day."

"Do you really like trapping?" Ellen asked again.

"Sure," Don said. "I like it fine."

"But not the killing part," Ellen said. "Nobody could like that. And all that time after the poor things are caught, waiting for someone to come along and put them out of their misery."

"You don't have to think about it," Don said. "Anyway, if I wasn't trapping somebody else would be."

Ellen sighed. "I know," she said. "I'm silly. Ray says I am too. But it does seem as if we just live by killing all the time—cougar and deer and bear and all the little animals in the woods. Salmon in the salt water, trout up the rivers. And even on the farm there's butchering beef and killing chickens and pigs when we have them."

"That's just the way it is. That's the way we make our living in this neck of the woods. If we didn't do it the city folks wouldn't have what they need to live on, so somebody's got to do it."

Ellen stood up. "Skip it," she said. "I'm sorry. I just get to thinking that way sometimes. It isn't as if I didn't know better either; I know why it is you and Ray and Dad like the woods and like fishing and hunting and trapping, and I'm glad you do. It's swell. But I wish those animals didn't have to wait in the traps like they do."

"They don't always," Don said. "Lots of times they die quick." He wished Ellen hadn't started to talk that way and wished he had been able to find something better to say himself. "Let's get started," he said. "It's quite a trip back home from here."

They found no trace of the cougar along the wagon road, but Don heard the cattle bellowing that night and went out with a light and the shotgun loaded with buckshot. He found the cows drawn into a tight nervous circle, their heads turned outwards. He swung the light round the pasture and for one brief instant held the cougar's great eyes in its beam; there was no time to shoot before he turned away into the brush.

The next day Don went up the river. He took the rifle, with some half-formed intention of killing a buck for the house, and two number four beaver traps. He started his hunt much as he had that day in September, following the trail along the sidehill between the river and the little swamp. He came to the swell-butted hem-

lock between the two cedars and felt a sudden keen disappointment because he was there and had found no track on the way. Any animal that lived on the hill, he knew well, traveled the trail in its comings and goings; his first hope, that the cougar was an old and hungry beachcomber and would come to a bait set, had been destroyed yesterday; now his hope of a good trail set was also fading. He thought back over the part of the trail he had traveled. There was no soft place along it, nothing that would readily show a track. But a male cougar would probably have stopped to scrape with his fore paws somewhere along it. Perhaps this wasn't a male; no one had said it was—it was just that you always figured an animal was a male when it started acting up. Don decided to go on to the creek that drained the swamp and follow that instead of the game trail that swung up from the swell-butted hemlock. There would be many soft places in the creek-bottom, even after the frost of the night before, and the track might show somewhere in it.

He had followed the creek about half the distance to the swamp when he realized that he was expecting to see something. The place was loaded, he told himself; there was something moving near him, perhaps following him or watching him. He had swung the rifle up into his left arm, so that his right hand was ready on the stock, his fingers near the trigger-guard, and he was moving cautiously and silently, watching the brush ahead of him and the slope of the draw on either side. He tried, as he always did, to find some foundation for

what he felt. He had thought first of the cougar, but now he was thinking of the big buck in the swamp, the one that had the white mark on his shoulder. He wanted to see that buck, to see him and not shoot him; the buck was old and wise, set apart from other deer by the mark on him and by his invariable return to his secure place in the little swamp; to find him there again now, to see the mark on him and know him, to be able to kill him and yet not shoot, would somehow add to what the Starbuck Valley held for Don, give him one more new claim and interest in it.

He was less than fifty yards from the swamp now and he turned up from the creek bed into the short salal of the dry hillside. There was no noticeable breeze, so he stood still and sucked his forefinger, then held it up; the finger cooled on the side towards the swamp, so he was right with whatever stirring of air there was. He raised a foot to step forward and a single desperate squeal of terror in the swamp stopped him. Before he could slacken his taut muscles he heard the thud of a deer bounding towards him. It burst out of the crab apples, head thrown back, eyes wild. Don stood stark still and the buck passed within five feet of him. He saw the drive of muscles under the winter coat, saw clearly the white blaze on the shoulder, the heavy-based horns, even the spread of cloven black hoof on the ground. He could smell terror and felt it himself, carried over from the agony of that single scream. Only when the last white flicker of the tail had disappeared

among the trees of the sidehill did he notice the splash of blood on the salal leaves.

For a moment Don hesitated. He wanted desperately to run on to the swamp, plunge through the crab apples and out into the open. Probably the cougar was still there; it might even be following up on the line of the buck's flight. If so, and if he waited, he would see it. But it might have stopped short where the buck tore free and be waiting there, held in frustrated rage. Uncle Joe would say wait, Don told himself, and he waited, without moving, his eyes on where the buck had burst out of the crab apples. He knew almost at once that he had chosen rightly. The cougar might not come, almost certainly would not. But it was unlikely that he would have waited in the swamp while a man worked through heavy brush towards him, still less likely that he would have been foolish enough to show himself even if he had waited. Don knew now that he was on the hill and, knowing that, knew that he must sooner or later travel the trail along the sidehill.

Don stood without moving for fully fifteen minutes. Then he was sure that the cougar was not coming and almost sure that he had left the swamp. He walked slowly and quietly to the edge of the swamp, then turned and followed round to where the salal-covered ridge ran out to the little dry hillock in the middle of the swamp. He went out along that, still cautiously, his rifle ready, until he came to the buck's bed on the trampled redness of rotten wood. What had happened was marked there clearly. Terror looked up at him

from the spread and twisted hoof points. Half-risen from his bed, the buck had crashed back at the impact of the cougar's body; then fought to his feet again, struggled a dozen frantic yards through the salal of the hillock, whirled, stumbled, torn himself free and bounded away. In the soft black mud at the edge of the swamp grass the cougar's splayed hind-print was clear and sharp, pressed deep with the urgency of his striving. He didn't hit right, Don thought, not far enough up on the shoulders, and he couldn't reach forward for the buck's muzzle; the blood was from a ripped flank and a torn shoulder maybe—no more than that. He felt proud of the buck and glad for the valley he belonged to. The cougar might be of the valley too, but in the little swamp he was still alien and a stranger.

Don left the swamp and went down the hill to the swell-butted hemlock and set his big traps where the trail was crowded close to it by the roots of a fir tree on the downhill side; one trap in the worn floor of the trail, the other a little to one side. He covered them carefully and went home.



Chapter XVI

DON WENT BACK TO HIS TRAPS EARLY THE NEXT morning. The ground was hard after the second night of frost and the sun was yellow in the clear sky. As he left the pastures he felt confident and excited. He knew that animals followed the trail, from the swamp and from all over the hill, because he had seen their tracks along it again and again in the snow of other winters—not only tracks of deer but cougar tracks and coon tracks and once a wolf track; and in summer and fall there were always signs of bear all along it. And the narrow place below the hemlock was a perfect set; there was not one chance in a hundred that anything passing through could avoid the traps. Then he began to doubt; he had set so many traps in so many perfect places up the Shifting Valley and returned with confidence only to find them untouched or sprung and empty. Almost any slight thing—his own scent in the swamp or along the trail for instance—could make all the difference. It was better not to expect much, he told himself; to expect anything at all after a single night was just foolish.

He could pick out the big hemlock between the cedars well before he came to it and as he saw it he felt excited again. He turned down from the trail and began to move quietly and carefully; he could feel his heart beating hard and fast and just for a moment he felt the old doubt of himself; if the cougar was in the trap it might be lightly held and break away before he could shoot. He searched his mind for other possibilities, trying to weigh them and face them ahead of time. Then suddenly he was directly below the hemlock; he ought to be able to see if there was anything in the traps, but he could not see. He moved up the hill a little way and still could not see anything; he felt sharp disappointment and, almost in the same moment, knew that the traps were no longer in place. The realization sent a surge of blood through his body and he moved forward again, trying to see the wires that held the traps and trace them down. Then he saw the cougar. It was lying quietly, crouched and looking away from him, some fifteen or twenty feet up the hill from the trail. Don worked a shell into the chamber of his rifle and as he did so there was a sudden explosion of sound on his right, a few feet away from him. He turned towards it, the rifle ready, and saw the second cougar. It was standing, facing directly towards him, and he shot quickly. Don had confused sight of a fiercely snarling face, four heavy paws all in the air at the same time and then, as the animal somersaulted and turned up the hill in flight, the frantic flailing of a long thick tail. He knew the trap no longer held it and fired again quickly,

aiming at a narrow angle behind the shoulder. The cougar crashed over in the salal, got up and dropped as Don fired a third time. He turned back to the first cougar. It had not moved, but now watched him with calmly curious eyes. Don raised the rifle, sighted on the neck behind the turned head, then knew from the wavering unsteadiness of his left hand and arm that he would miss. He lowered the rifle, took a deep breath, raised it again and fired. The shot was good.

Don went from one to the other of the dead animals, scarcely able to believe what had happened. His first thought had been that they were male and female, traveling together. But he found they were both males, and both rather small about head and shoulders for males. He looked at them more carefully, putting his head well down to bring the fur at an angle with the light, and could just see faint traces of the spots of their cub-coats. They were full-grown cubs; probably, he thought, the mother had been killed and they were not able to hunt properly for themselves—that would account for their coming round the farm. He took out his knife to start skinning; as he opened it he thought he heard from somewhere on the hill above him a slight, sharp sound like a whistle. He stood still, the knife in his hand, listening. A slow minute passed and he heard it again, a tiny sound but clear and urgent. He remembered something Steve Hardy had told him: "There's lots will tell you cougars scream in the woods—I've seen it wrote in books. Well, I never heard it and I never met another man as heard it—not up in this coun-

try anyway. The most I ever heard was a whistle; if you catch some cubs and raise them they'll do that all the time—whistle, calling to each other. It's kind of pretty and not very loud, but I reckon they can hear it far enough." Don heard the sound again and his eyes searched the brush above him, but he could see nothing. He changed his mind about skinning the cubs on the spot. It was only a short distance back to the farm and there was no sense to leaving the carcasses near the set to warn away the mother or another cub, whichever it was back there on the hill. He picked up the first, slung it across his shoulders and carried it out to the edge of the pasture. Then he came back for the second and dragged it along the trail well past the hemlock. He left it there, came back and reset his traps carefully in the trail. Then he carried the second cougar out.

That was a big day for Don. There was all the triumph and excitement of bringing out two cougars when a single one would have been almost unbelievable triumph. There was Aunt Maud's pride and Ellen's astonishment and Uncle Joe's calmer surprise and quiet certainty that the traps would catch again; all these were good things. In the afternoon he went down to the hospital to see Tubby. Instead of following the wagon road he went round by the tide flats and looked over his traps there. He found three coon and a good dark mink, and so had the whole story to tell Tubby when he saw him. Tubby was well, talking and laughing freely, sitting up in bed with the color back in his face again. Don tried to hold his story back and talk of other things

until it could come out casually and naturally, but he found himself telling it almost as soon as he was in the room. Tubby listened to every word, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"Gee," he said when Don was finished. "We never did that good up the valley. You ought to stay down here, Don, and not go back. You'd make her pay."

Don shook his head. "No," he said. "It won't last. All it is is getting a few breaks—easy pickings at the start. If I'm going to make her at all it's got to be up the valley."

"But heck, you've made real money today," Tubby was counting up, marking off the catch on his fingers against the bedclothes. "Two cougars, that's forty bucks in bounty alone. And three coon, say twenty or twenty-five bucks. And fifteen for the mink anyway—likely more. That's eighty bucks in one day. And you can do it all in comfort. No long lines, no living in a shack, no Jetson to figure out, no troubles at all."

"I know," Don said. "But that's the cream; it wouldn't go on like that. I've got to get back up that valley and learn something about marten; that's what I started out to do and I'm not going to quit on it now."

"If you're set on going back up why not get a permit from Ted to trap beaver? You'd make her sure then."

"No. There's not enough of them. Sure, a guy'd pick up a few skins, but he'd ruin it for himself for years. I want them to build up and spread around the valley so the line'll really be worth something one day."

Tubby nodded soberly. "I guess you're right," he said

slowly. "I always have to look for some easy way out." He sat up straight in the bed and clasped his arms round his knees. "But look, Don. It won't be so long till I'm getting out of here. Doc Hale says I'm healing up fast, thanks to what you did fixing me up in there and hauling me out—he says you saved my life with what you did and I'm not forgetting that—"

"Skip it," Don said. "I didn't do anything any other guy wouldn't have done. And we'd both be up there yet, likely, if Jetson hadn't come along."

"I don't care what you say, I know what you did. And I know the ordinary guy couldn't have done it. But I'm going to make it up to you. Just as soon as I'm in shape I'm coming back in there and really help out, so we'll make her sure and you'll get the *Mallard* and everything the way you want it."

Don felt suddenly relieved and happy. He had tried not to admit it to himself, but the idea of going back into the valley and spending the rest of the winter there alone had worried him badly. "You mean that, Tub?" he said. "You'll come back in with me again?"

"You bet I will. Just as soon as they let me out of this darn bunk. I was just getting to like it anyway when I had to let that fool ax slip."

"Gee," Don said. "That's swell." He held out his hand and Tubby shook it solemnly. "I'll tell you what," Don said, "it's going to be a whole lot better when you do come in again. I'm going to chase up that Jetson guy and find out what the heck the score is with him. A darn

mystery hanging over you like that just ain't good enough."

The day after Don was at the hospital was Christmas Day, but he went up to the traps by the swell-butted hemlock. The female cougar was there, held by only one of the traps. He had almost wished that she would not be there. Somehow that little soft whistle on the hillside after he had killed the cubs had bothered him; it had made him remember what Ellen had said about trapping, and the thought of trapping the mother through the cubs had seemed contemptible and wretched. But now that he saw her it was different. To put himself in position for a clean shot he had to move in too close, because she was behind the tree. When she saw him she flattened her ears and her face became a savage snarl. Don could see the strong white teeth bared, and one front paw raised and threatening; then he saw that the single trap on her left hind foot held her only lightly; it had sprung late, catching little more than her claws, and somehow a stick was wedged in the jaws, holding off most of the strength of the springs. You're a fool, he thought; you could have pulled out of that if you had had any guts. He moved again, because he still hadn't a clear shot for the neck, and as he moved she spat and snarled and drove her lifted paw at the ground. She backed away a little, still snarling, and crouched, her heavy tail twitching. Don raised his rifle quickly and fired. She sprang forward from her crouch and was free of the trap. Don had moved quickly to one side as he fired, swinging his body to face her, the

rifle ready again. He felt surprised at his own calmness, at his solid certainty that his shot had done its work and his power to move to best advantage. It seemed to him he even knew ahead of time that she would land clumsily, make the swift, spread-eagled half turn and go off in a savage, broken run down the hill. He followed her without hesitation, the rifle still ready, his eyes searching the slope carefully ahead of him. He had a feeling of confidence and security in his own ability that he had never known before and did not fully recognize now, and he was not surprised that he found her easily. She was under a log, with only her hind legs and great tail visible; the legs were sprawled and Don reached down, gripped her tail and pulled the body out on to the open hillside. He held the rifle ready as he did so and could have pressed the muzzle against her and fired instantly if she had moved. But she was quite dead, as he had known she would be.

Because it was Christmas Day he skinned her there and hurried home. It was good to have the thing finished now, before the important part of Christmas; tomorrow he would pick up his traps from the tide flats and pack his stuff for the trip back to the cabin. On the day after he would start out and try to make it through to the cabin in one day. But the rest of this day was without obligations or worries and he was glad that it could be so—glad too that he was down at the farmhouse for the day instead of alone in the cabin up the valley. He remembered Tubby complaining about the doubtful pleasures of a Christmas Day in Shifting Val-

ley and remembered firmly setting aside his suggestion that a quick trip outside would not be time wasted. "Christmas," he had said. "That's all right for women and girls to fuss over—they get a kick out of those kind of things. But it's right when the traps will be doing real business up here and we'd have to be crazy to take time out." Well, they had taken time out; and, with the cougar skin heavy in his packsack, Don admitted to himself that it wasn't time wasted.

Aunt Maud always surpassed herself at Christmas time. She did it effortlessly, by virtue of long motherhood and a pioneer wife's sure knowledge of how to make the most of things at hand. She was complaining when Don got back to the farmhouse. "It don't seem natural without young ones around," she told her husband's back. "I wish Nancy and Marylin could have got down like last year. It don't seem right a body going through with everything the same as usual just for grown-ups." She watched with an experienced eye as Don swung his packsack down. "If the boy hasn't done it again," she said. "You'd best have that Ray of yours look to his reputation," she told Ellen.

Uncle Joe dropped his paper and sat straight in his chair. "What is it this time? The old one?"

Don nodded and Joe slapped a hand down on his knee. "I'll be twisted!" he said. "That's one time you had me fooled."

"I thought you said the traps'd catch again for sure," Don said.

"Sure, a third cub maybe, but not the old one. Open it up and let's see what sort of a beast she is."

The three of them crowded round Don and admired the female's fierce slender head. Aunt Maud said at last: "Put it out in the woodshed. It's right to do a needed thing on this day, but there's no call to cling to it. Clean up, Don. We'll be waiting for you next thing we know."

Don was back in the kitchen and sitting down before dinner was on the table. His hair was slicked down and he had on clean pants and a clean shirt and a brand-new tie. He felt the contrast between all this and the way he had been an hour or so earlier, bending over the body of the cougar on the hillside, his sleeves rolled up and his knife working in long easy strokes to cut the skin away. It's no use talking, he told himself; there's something about being able to get back to a good clean room with lots of light, and a cloth on the table and good dishes and good food that you don't have to cook yourself.

He watched Aunt Maud, as Uncle Joe was watching her. She was dishing up the food now, strong muscles showing in her big right forearm as she used the heavy spoon. Mashed potatoes in a great creamy heap, not dry enough to crumble yet just stiff enough for the last spoonful to stand up like the curling crest of a wave. Bright orange squash. Scarlet cranberries swimming in a round glass dish. A tight, snowwhite head of winter broccoli with tight green heads of brussels sprouts around it on the platter. Yellow corn of last summer's

canning and all the pickles that came to the table one at a time on lesser days. Rich dark Oregon grape jelly for Uncle Joe, because he thought better of that than of cranberries. Then Ellen opened the oven door and the bird was ready—a Canada goose, full breasted, dark brown and gleaming with juices, fragrant with the familiar scents of the dressing that Aunt Maud used only on this day.

They sat at the table and Uncle Joe stood solemnly and spoke a grace which, like the dressing, served on this one day for all the year; Don felt the rich phrases he had scarcely noticed in other years—"these Thy good creatures which Thy bounteous liberality hath provided . . . mercifully grant that we by them being healthfully nourished . . . to perform all duty and service due unto Thy Divine Majesty. . . ." Uncle Joe's full voice seemed to love the words and the occasion, and the room and the loaded table became dedicated, no longer a part of everyday life in spite of the frosty sun that streamed over the bare pastures and in through the windows. Uncle Joe began to carve and everyone was talking again and Don suddenly knew that he was very hungry.

"I'll bet you boys wouldn't have found yourselves a goose up the valley," Uncle Joe said.

"Sure we would," Don told him. "There's lakes and potholes where a man'd surely find geese. We had it all figured out down to a patch of highbush cranberries in the big meadow."

"Think you could have made out this well?"

Don grinned. "No," he said. "Hardly. It takes Aunt Maud and Ellen to think up a meal like this one. But I'm trying to figure out something for New Year's."

"You'll be here New Year's," Aunt Maud said. "You can't do any better any place than you've done here the last two or three days."

"It won't last," Don said. "I've got the best of it now."

"You could wait and go out with Ray when he comes back," Ellen said. "He won't be long now."

"There's not enough in it for two guys."

"Of course he'll wait," Aunt Maud said. "He doesn't have to go back up that miserable valley all by himself."

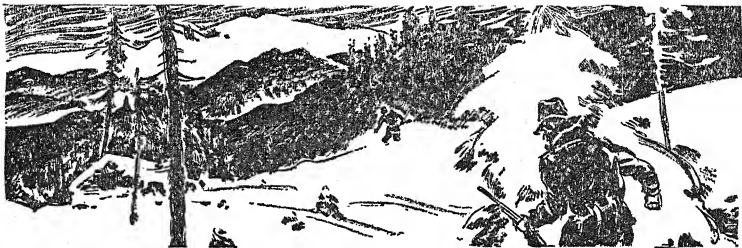
Don looked at his uncle, silently asking help. "Don's right," Joe Morgan said. "If he's going to make a real stake this winter he'll have to make it up the valley. Anyway he can't let it beat him now."

Aunt Maud snorted. "You men think up more nonsense. That's no place for a boy alone. You're going to stay down, aren't you, Don?"

Don answered her directly. "No," he said. "I'm starting up the valley day after tomorrow."

He said it firmly, but he was scared too and watched her face. Her lips were thin and straight for a moment and her big nose seemed bigger, the way it always did when she was angry. Then something changed in her. She didn't smile, but the hardness went out of her eyes.

"It's wrong and it's right," she said. "Wrong to let you go and right for you to go. You've shown up more of a man than I ever thought you would, more times than once. Go on your way if you must and see no harm comes of it."



Chapter XVII

EVEN THOUGH HE HAD LIKED HIS TIME AT THE FARM SO well Don felt his return to the valley was a real homecoming. The weather was still fine and cold, and the trip up the first log jam was an old and easy story. He left Tubby's skiff there and carried his stuff in two trips to the canoe. He had brought in what he needed to repair the canoe and he did the work that afternoon and went on to the mouth of the canyon early the next morning. Because the river was still fairly high and his load was light he back-packed round the canyon from there; before dark he was settled in.

The enthusiasm of his return carried him easily over the first week. He checked over all his trap-lines and found he had caught three marten and a few weasels. One marten skin, in the last trap on the east fork line, had been spoiled by mice, but the other two—one from each of the lines he had run across the contours—were perfect, large and in prime condition. He ran out half a dozen more traps along the level of the two successful ones and felt he was really learning something at last.

Then the snow came, three or four inches of it, light and dry and powdery. The cold weather did not break with it but grew colder, and Don read this as another hopeful sign because now he could learn what moved in his country. He began learning almost at once; a wolverine patrolled the line from a little above the cabin sometimes out to the last trap on the middle fork—that was why they had found so many traps sprung and empty before Christmas. At least two female cougars hunted the sidehills above the meadows on the west fork and a male came down to them from farther up the valley. Another male had come down the east fork, where the snow was deepest, and Don suspected he had killed somewhere on the right bank of the river, not far from the cabin. But there was little that told of marten and the new traps did not catch and Don began to feel a sense of difficulty and despair weighing on him again.

He felt it so strongly one night that he tried to find release in looking over the few furs he had caught. He took them off the boards and turned the fur side out and stroked them until the brown hairs shone brilliantly in the fire and candle light. The sight of them warmed him and delighted him and gave him briefly a sense of a job well done. There was something electric and alive in the superb quality of the needle-sharp hairs and the richness of the color; the wiry strength and quick grace of the animal seemed still held there. Then Don remembered that the skins were not even his; they had to be sold and they were not enough. He began to feel

that every catch had been luck, that he had to depend on luck, not knowledge or skill, for every catch he would make through the whole winter. The burden of the thought made him miserable and he wished Tubby were with him, to joke about it and laugh it away. He wondered if Tubby would come up as he had promised, and knew that he would. Then he thought of Jetson, Jetson and Tubby's fear of Jetson. Tubby had not even wanted to admit that Jetson had helped his escape from the valley—"Sure," Tubby had said. "He came along at the right time. Spying on us, same as always—he must have been. Sure he helped. He'd help anytime to get us out of the valley."

Tubby might be up within a week or ten days. There seemed little more to be done about the traps than hope. But the riddle of Jetson could be solved. Sitting there, smoothing the finest of the marten skins between his hands, Don made up his mind that he would solve it and have the solution waiting for Tubby when he came.

The next morning he started up the west fork. He realized that he had seen no sign of Jetson since Christmas, but he felt certain that the man-made trail on the south side of the valley would tell him what to expect. He decided not to follow it all the way in, because he wanted to see without being seen if possible, and to walk openly along a trail that his quarry used would be to invite swift discovery. So he followed the first line of traps he and Tubby had set out along the north side of the meadows, cut across the beaver dam at the head

of the meadows and began to climb the game trail along which he had set traps the night Tubby cut his foot.

As he climbed the trail he met suddenly fresh cougar tracks coming down. The tracks were feathery fresh, with the powder snow still falling back into them and Don judged that the cougar had heard him coming up the trail and turned off. At any other time he would have doubled back to follow them, but today his purpose was strong and clear in his mind and because he did not know how long this might take him, he had no wish to shorten his time. He did turn off to check the half dozen traps he had set out along the hill from the one that had caught the marten, but he found nothing in them. And so he came to Jetson's trail. He did not step out on to the trail, but followed carefully along just below it for a hundred yards or more. Deer had passed along it since the snow and the cougar's tracks were clear and sharp on the deer tracks. But there was no man track.

Don felt disappointed. Perhaps Jetson was back in his own country by now. But even so there would be something to be learned by following the trail out—no man would cut a trail through a country unless he wished to get to some particular place for some particular purpose; by following the trail it should be possible to find the place and judge the purpose.

He felt uncomfortable on the lower side of the trail. If he came suddenly on the end of it and Jetson was there he would be at a disadvantage; from the upper side he would be able to see better without being seen.

But crossing was a difficulty. He thought of jumping across in some brushy place where his tracks would be hidden, but he knew that a woodsman of Jetson's experience and quickness would certainly notice the snow swept off the salal leaves by his passing. He found a small tree fallen slanting up the sidehill so that the trail passed under it; he could climb that, but snow knocked from it would fall on the trail and attract Jetson's attention, even if he failed to notice the cut of the tracks on the log as he came towards it. Then, two or three hundred yards farther on, Don found what he wanted—a big fir, also blown slantwise up the hill across the trail. He went down a little and climbed on the root. Then he walked the tree, keeping carefully to the center of the trunk and stepping lightly so that the snow would not fall away at the sides. It carried him well up the hill, fully a hundred feet above the trail, and as he dropped down from it he turned and climbed still farther up. He came on to a rockslide and something about the shape of the rocks under the snow made him glance up along it. Not fifty feet away he saw the dark mouth of a cave. Don climbed the slide to the cave and looked inside. He saw a rough homemade wheelbarrow there and, as his eyes became used to the darkness, two picks and a shovel leaning against one wall.

He did not go in, but followed on along the sidehill, angling down a little to keep the trail in sight. The going was good and he traveled quite fast, but his body was tense with expectancy now and he was listening

and watching closely as he went. Perhaps half a mile beyond the tunnel he noticed below him a rectangle of snow that seemed unnaturally smooth and regular; he looked more closely and recognized it as the roof of a lean-to building. He moved forward a little and saw just below it the peaked roof of a small cabin, with the snow half melted from it. He became very cautious now. There was no smoke from the stove pipe, so the owner probably was not at home. But the snow melted from the roof of the cabin meant that he had been there and had a fire since the snow. Don felt suddenly foolish. He had come to find Jetson, to ask him straight, aggressive questions and expect answers. But Jetson was not there; he might be very close or he might be half a day's travel away. Don thought of turning back and waiting for a better time, then decided to go on. He started, still tensely and cautiously, towards the cabin, meaning to find Jetson's tracks and follow them out to wherever he might be. Then he knew he was watched. With an effort he kept his eyes ahead of him; it might be the cougar following him—he had been followed by cougars before, known of it without seeing them and confirmed it by sight of the tracks next day—but he felt it was not. He wondered why he knew it was someone or something behind him, not ahead in the cabin. Then he turned slowly, almost calmly, the rifle ready, and saw Jetson leaning against a tree some thirty feet above him on the hill.

Jetson was smiling and it was the first time Don had seen him smile. But the scar above his left eye was red,

as it had been when he came upon Don sawing wood. He had not opened the breech of his rifle. He said: "Hello, youngster; looking for somebody?"

Don opened the breech of his own rifle—it seemed the only white thing to do when you were on another man's ground. Then he remembered that the whole Shifting Valley, with all its three forks, was really his own ground and wished he had left the breech closed. He answered Jetson's smile in spite of himself. "Kind of," he said. "Least I was hoping I might find you."

Jetson came down the hill towards him; he wasn't smiling now. "You sure of that? You wouldn't maybe have been hoping you wouldn't find anyone home?"

"You heard me. I was looking for you and now I've found you there's some things I want to know about."

Jetson smiled again and Don noticed the gentleness of him as he had the first time they met. "That's fair enough," Jetson said. "No need to stand out here in the snow to do our talking. I took a feed off of you once and the least I can do is fix you up the same."

They went down to the cabin and Jetson lit the kindling that was already in the stove. Don saw that the cabin was well and neatly built of peeled cedar logs chinked with blue clay; it was small, but had about it an atmosphere of normal and sensible living by a man well used to gauging the exact degree of comfort he could reasonably achieve under any special set of circumstances—everything was there and in its place, everything was strong and tidily made, yet there

were no frills. Don said: "I didn't know you had a place like this in here."

"Something you had to find out, eh?" Jetson said. "Well, I thought you'd come to it sooner or later."

"I guess I've got some right," Don said. He felt scared, but he wasn't going to let himself back down now he had come this far. "I've got this country for my registered line and everything, and you've been snoopin' around watching Tubby and me ever since we came into it."

"Maybe it's just as well I have been. You had yourselves in trouble last time I saw you."

"That's right enough. But that wasn't what you were watching for."

"It's all in how you look at it."

"Let's skip it," Don said. "Tubby and I know what you did for us and I guess we're grateful. But we want to know what the score is and what's more we figure we got a right to know."

"Sure, maybe you have. One thing at a time though. Right now we're going to eat and there's no sense to getting hostile on an empty stomach."

"Maybe I don't want to eat with you till I know what the score is," Don said.

The vivid red had faded from the scar on Jetson's forehead when they came into the cabin, but it was back there now. "Go easy, young Morgan," Jetson said. "I've eaten with you and been civil; you're going to eat with me and be civil. When we're through, you can start to ask questions and likely enough I won't

hold out on you any. I've kind of taken a shine to the way you stack up and there's no need to go and spoil it all."

Don felt ashamed, yet he still had an uneasy idea he ought to stay with his point. "That's a promise?" he asked. "You won't try to give me the run-around?"

Jetson laughed. "You don't scare easy, do you? No, I'll come through." Don held out his hand and they shook on it. Then Jetson put food on the table and they began to eat.

"How's the fur business?" Jetson asked.

In spite of the armistice Don glanced at him suspiciously. "Not so bad," he said. "And not so good, either."

"You don't know such an awful pile about trapping marten, do you?"

"I suppose you reckon you could teach me?" Don's voice strained with sarcasm.

Jetson seemed not to notice. "It wouldn't be hard if you wanted to learn. You've got the makings of a dandy woodsman."

Don hardened himself against the compliment. "You got traps out up here?"

"Hold your horses. I thought we was to leave that stuff for later. But if it makes you any easier—no, I'm not here for that."

"O.K.," Don said. "That's fair enough; it's part of what I wanted to know, anyway."

"You want to know how to catch marten too?"

"You bet your life I do. I figured there must be more

to it than I knew about and I meant to go over and find out from French Louie, but it didn't seem we could take the time ever."

"Well, I don't know it all," Jetson said. "But I'll show you what I do know when you've finished taking me apart."

Don ate his food and they talked almost easily through the rest of the meal. Many of the things that Jetson said were new to Don; he seemed to have a strange deep knowledge of the woods and the animals that moved through them, a knowledge that was like and yet unlike Uncle Joe's. Uncle Joe knew about things near farms and salt water and open country. Jetson knew about the woods far back, near the mountains, and he knew the mountains too. Uncle Joe had ideas about hunting for sport, though he was practical with them and had strict ideas about how everything should be done. All Jetson's ideas were very real and hard—he was interested in how to get the best results and get them quick.

Don was almost sorry when the meal was over. He didn't feel so aggressive now; the way Jetson talked made you like him—you began to like him as soon as you were close enough to watch his eyes, and when he smiled his rare smile you felt that anything you had thought against him must be wrong and bad. But we've still got some answers coming, Don thought, and I'm going after them. Jetson showed no sign of trying to avoid the questions. He cleared the dishes away from

the table, sat down and said: "O.K. What is it you want to know?"

"First of all," Don said. "What right have you got to be in here spying on us all the time?"

Jetson nodded. "Yes. Go on; let's hear the rest. I guess most of them have the same answer."

"Was that you shot at us across the meadows that day?"

"Near you," Jetson said. "Not at you."

"Was that you came down around the cabin while we were away and used to check the trail 'most every day to see which way we had headed out?"

"It sure wasn't anybody else. There's been nobody else in the valley all winter except you and your partner and me."

"What call have you got to do things like that around another man's line?"

"I figured I could scare you out," Jetson said. "You weren't catching marten worth a darn and it looked like if you had any sense you'd take a hint and go on out to your salt water line. But you didn't scare so easy and I guess you kept figuring the marten'd start to come."

"There's more to it than that," Don said. "You say you haven't put out any traps. You've got some idea in wanting us out of the valley."

"You win," Jetson said. "I guess I may as well tell you the works. I acted kind of foolish in some ways—it don't all make good sense even to me when I look

back at it. So you'll have to take it on faith and believe what I say."

"I'll believe you," Don said, because he felt that he would.

"Well, I've got a mine up here. You know that because you went up and looked in the old shaft this morning. There's more to it than the old shaft; I've been working back in here for close on five years now and nobody ever got wise to it till you did. I didn't want anybody should get wise—I've lost out that way once before—and that's why I tried to scare you out. Soon as I knew your Dad had been a prospector I figured I had to."

"I told you I didn't give a darn for rock."

"Lots of men don't give a darn for it till they see some," Jetson said. "Then they go plumb crazy for it."

Don felt in his pocket and brought something out. "This here's about the only piece of rock I've stopped to look at since I came up in this country." He threw the rock on the table.

Jetson picked it up and looked at it closely. He took a miner's glass out from inside his shirt and went over to the window for a better light. Suddenly he looked up at Don. "You get that up this fork?"

"Sure."

"Right near here?"

"Not so awful far away. I'll show you the place."

"It's outcrop too," Jetson said. "How many claims you got staked?"

Don laughed. "Not a one," he said. "I told you I wouldn't know how to go about it."

Jetson came slowly back to the table. "You ain't kidding?"

"Cross my heart," Don said.

"You mean you don't even figure to stake none?"

"No, not till now anyway. What's so good about it?"

"Maybe not so much," Jetson said. "Maybe a whole lot. But if it's somewhere on this sidehill it ties right in with what I've got here. And if it does that—boy, I'm telling you we got something big."

"What is it? Gold?"

"No, I wouldn't figure to find any gold. Silver and lead and maybe a few other things too. A whole darn mountain of it, pretty near."

"What do you figure to do about it?"

"Check this outcrop you found, stake it if it's the way it looks. Then go to work. Listen, Morgan, I got you all wrong, but I'll sure make it up to you from now on. I'm going to start in right away and put you right about marten—right as I can, that is. And if this rock of yours means what I think it does the claims we stake on that part of the showing will go in your name. O.K. with you?"

"Sure," Don said. "I wouldn't know about the mining angle—all I did was knock off a chunk of rock and stick it in my pocket. But it'd sure be swell if you can show me where to find marten and how to catch 'em once in a while."

"Listen, marten don't mean a thing alongside the other, but if it's marten you want I'll do what I can." Jetson walked across to a cupboard on the other side of the cabin and came back with a small wide-mouthed bottle, tightly corked. "That's part of the secret—scent. An old marten trapper never lets his own brand out of his sight; that's why I've got this up here with me even though I'm not trapping. Another thing, you've got your lines too far down in the valleys. The most you can expect to do is pick up a few local furs. The kind of country marten like best is a good big mountain, going right up to snow and pretty well clear of underbrush."

"Like the way it is out at the end of my line on the other two forks?" Don asked.

"That's right. It's the same farther up this fork too. That's where you've got to look for them. Now come on outside and I'll show you the rest of it."

As they went out Jetson picked up an ax. He led the way a hundred feet or so up the hill from the cabin and stopped beside a fair-sized hemlock tree. "This one'll do," he said. There was a four-inch sapling a few steps away and he went over to it and cut it down. With quick sure strokes of the ax he trimmed off a few limbs and cut away a seven- or eight-foot length. He cut a one-sided taper on each end, then a deep smooth notch at one end on the opposite side from the taper. He looked at Don. "Know what's next?"

"I think so," Don said. "Notch the tree."

"Right." With four clean ax strokes Jetson notched

the hemlock four or five feet above the ground. He picked up the pole, set one end in the notch and the other on the ground; the notch in the pole made a flat platform a few inches away from the tree. Jetson pointed to it. That's where you set your trap," he said. "Nail your bait on the tree a foot or so above the trap—wire it on the nail so the air gets all round it; it lasts longer that way. Then put a dab of scent just below the bait. You can drive a peg in the ground against the end of the pole to keep it from sliding if you want, or you can nail it to the tree."

"I've seen sets like that," Don said. "I didn't know they were the best set for marten though."

"Sure they are. A marten's an inquisitive beast. He'll catch that scent from a long way off and come down to it. Next thing he knows he just got to climb up and see what it's all about. The pole makes a dandy little highway for him right up to where the smell's coming from. And the bait gets him all excited so he can't think of nothing else right when he's coming to the trap—that's why it's good sometimes to hang up a blue jay's wing or something that'll move in the wind for bait."

"What's in the scent?" Don asked.

"I could make a great secret of that," Jetson said. "Different trappers have different fancy ways of making up a scent, but I don't know as it makes much difference in what they catch so long as the main things are there. I put some fish in a jug in the summer and leave it to rot down till there's plenty of liquid. Then I pour some of that in my bottle, put two beaver cas-

tors in with it and maybe a spoonful of aniseed. That's all."

"Sounds like a heck of a lot to me," Don said. "Where am I going to get hold of all that stuff before the season's over?"

Jetson put a hand in his pocket and held out the bottle he had shown Don in the cabin. "Take this. I don't need it—I've got more over on my own line if I do."

"Gee, thanks a lot. You're sure you can spare it?"

"With what that rock of yours has given me to think about I'm not liable to be worrying my head much about traps this winter. You got that all straight now? About the trap and where to look for your marten and so on? You can put a drop of scent other places along the trail you know. It doesn't all have to be at your sets."

"I think I understand all right. It sure solves one problem that had me worried—deep snow. All a guy's got to do is keep the snow brushed off the traps and they'll keep working for him."

"That's right. They won't freeze up so bad either. And the marten'll die quicker in that kind of a trap and the mice won't get at the fur either."

They went back to the cabin and Don said: "I guess I've got to hit for home. She'll be getting dark before long. You want to see where I found that rock?"

Jetson looked at him in astonishment. "You mean you'd show it to me right now, before you've done a darn thing about it?"

"Sure, why not?"

"They sure left something out when they made you," Jetson said. "And it didn't spoil the job any either. Listen; you show me that stuff now, what's to stop me staking out a batch of claims and not putting your name on a one of them?"

"Nothing, I guess. But I don't figure you'd do it."

"You stay here with me tonight," Jetson said. "I'll come out part way with you tomorrow—you can show me then. We'll take down a couple of sticks of powder and see what she looks like, even if there is snow on the ground."



Chapter XVIII

DON STARTED IN RIGHT AWAY ON THE BIG JOB OF changing his lines over to match his new knowledge. Just at first the difficulties of the change almost discouraged him. The cabin seemed to be in the wrong place—taking the lines on to the back mountains made the lines too long. And it was already so late in the season that the days seemed too precious to waste in changing over. But Jetson had said that the first good movement of marten would come with the first heavy snow and all that really mattered was getting the traps out ahead of that. So Don stayed with it and day by day his difficulties seemed less, and when the new traps started to catch marten in a way the old ones never had he found himself a whole new fund of energy and enthusiasm.

Then Tubby came back. Don had spent the previous night out at the end of the middle fork line, sheltering from a snowstorm under a lean-to of balsam limbs set against the base of a rock bluff. He came near the cabin a little before dark and smelt woodsmoke; at first he thought it was Jetson, then Tubby came to the door

to throw out some water and Don shouted and began to run.

"Tubby," he yelled. "For the love of Pete, I didn't figure you'd be in for a couple of weeks yet."

Tubby stood in the doorway grinning. "The doc said there was no holding me and I might as well go to it as stay down there and fret myself to death."

"Your Dad say it was O.K. to come?"

"Sure. Dad said if a little thing like that was going to lay me off all winter I might as well be dead."

Don laughed. "Your old man's tough," he said. "But it's sure good to see your fat face again."

"It's sure good to be back. And I ain't fat—not the way I used to be."

Don looked closely at him. "No," he said soberly, "that's right, you're not."

Jetson came down the morning after Tubby got back. Don had told Tubby the whole long story of what had happened, but Tubby was still suspicious of Jetson and watched him cautiously. Jetson was enthusiastic about the results of two or three shots he had put in where Don had found the rock. "Looks just the way she ought," he said. "If she's not tied in some way with what I've got up above then I'll go get me a job in a coal mine."

"You mean you really think it's worth something? You can get some big outfit interested in it?"

"They'll be interested, sure enough,—when I give them a chance to be. There's plenty of time for that. What we'll do is open her up ourselves all we can, so

as when it comes to bargaining we'll know what we got."

"Where does Don come out on it?" Tubby asked suspiciously. "He found the rock, didn't he?"

"Don and me are partners—ain't that right, Don?" Jetson turned from Tubby's hard eyes to ask the question and Don nodded. "There's room for you too if you want to come in."

"I don't get it," Tubby said. "It's not so long since you were trying every way to scare us out of the valley. Then you help us out when we're in a jackpot and the next thing I know here's you and Don just like that." He held out his right hand with the first two fingers pressed tightly together.

Jetson turned to Don again. "You told him how it was, didn't you? About what I'm trying to do up the west fork and all that?"

"Sure I did," Don said. "Don't be that way, Tub."

"I still don't get it," Tubby said.

Jetson shrugged his shoulders. "Suit yourself. There's not much I can do about it." He stood up. "I'd better move on home. Let me know if the traps don't catch for you, Don."

"No," Don said. "You don't have to go." He turned to Tubby. "What's got into you, Tub? It's not like you to act so mean when a guy's done the best he can to square himself. Lee's helped us a whole lot—like as not he saved your life."

"Sure he did. But he took good care he was helping us get the heck out of the valley at the same time. Just

because you've talked with him and he's told you a couple of things about marten traps you want to forget he took a crack at us when we were minding our own business. Everybody knows the reason he's up here is because he killed a guy once."

Don saw that the scar on Jetson's forehead was bright red and he felt his own face flushed with embarrassment. Tubby looked scared and pale and very determined. Jetson pulled out tobacco and papers and his hands were trembling and fumbling as he started to roll a cigarette. Don started to say something but Jetson said: "I'll go." He went outside and Don followed him.

"Gee," Don said. "I'm sorry Tubby had to act that way. He'll get over it. He ain't like that really!"

"It's O.K.," Jetson said. "It's my own fault anyway. Look, one thing I wanted to tell you is to run one line up the west fork beyond the meadows. One up there and one up the middle fork is plenty to handle from here. Next season rest the middle fork line and use the east fork. By the season after next you ought to have a cabin up at the junction and you can rest the west fork."

"I was trying to figure that out," Don said. "But I hadn't got it that good yet. That's real sense."

"Sure it is. You can stay at my cabin for the west fork line too. It ought to help out some."

"That's swell. I'll be seeing you then."

"Sure," Jetson said and went away. Don turned back into the cabin. Tubby was sitting at the table looking

miserable, but Don didn't feel sorry for him. He said: "Well, you sure are a great help. First break we get you have to go and tear the whole darn works."

"I don't like that guy," Tubby said. "I don't trust him and nothing you can say is going to make me."

"You're crazy. You've got to learn to judge a guy by the way he acts, not by some lousy thing you heard about him once."

"I don't like the way he acts—or looks either."

"That's because you don't look at him right. He doesn't look mean, not when you see him close to. A mean guy hasn't got eyes like that."

"A man doesn't spy on you and shoot at you for no reason without he's mean."

Don looked closely at Tubby. "Trouble with you is you're plumb scared of him—so darned scared I'll bet you don't even know what he really looks like."

"Sure I'm scared of him. But that doesn't mean I'm not righter than you are about him."

Don turned away. "I'm going out on the line. Coming?"

"Sure," Tubby said. "That's what I came up here for."

It was a gray day in the valley, heavily gray and cold, though not as cold as it had been. Don started out fast over the trail, leaving Tubby to follow as best he could. He still felt mad at Tubby and he knew the thing was not closed—it could not be, because they needed Jetson and yet, Don told himself, Tubby was his friend before Jetson and nothing could change that.

Over his shoulder, still walking, he said: "She's going to snow. That means we've got to keep moving the next few days."

"Why's that?" Tubby asked. "Because we might not be able to find the traps?"

"No. So as to get the east fork traps picked up and set out over on the west fork. That way we can run both lines from the cabin and we'll have a chance of making a killing—Lee says that up until the first big snow a man never does pick up more than a few local marten."

A moment after he had finished speaking Don stopped suddenly and pointed to a track in the trail ahead of him. "See that?" he asked Tubby.

Tubby came up beside him, and looked down at the track. "Yes. What in heck is it?"

"Wolverine," Don said. "That's the guy has been springing all these traps along here. I took them out when I moved the line farther up the middle fork."

"Gee, we might have known that was what it was. D'you think moving the traps will stop him?"

Don shook his head. "I doubt it. We'll have to catch him some way. Lee says to try turning some traps upside down in case he knows to reach up under the pan."

"Did you do it yet?"

"No. I figured I'd wait and see if he was still around. We'll do it today."

The wolverine tracks led on up the trail, over Don's returning tracks of the night before. He had turned

off several times, to circle a tree or investigate something else that stirred his curiosity, but always he came back and at the junction they saw at once that he had gone up the middle fork line.

"Going up?" Tubby asked.

"You bet. That's a fresh track and he hasn't come back. We might even see him up there. The first new set isn't more than two or three hundred yards up anyway, and I want to see if he's been at it."

Don realized suddenly that he had forgotten to be mad at Tubby since they first came on the wolverine tracks. He was mad at the wolverine now instead. He had heard often of wolverines that followed trap-lines night after night, springing every trap, stealing every bait, solving the most cunning sets, pulling out if they did get caught. Now it seemed that all his high hopes for his new line were to be destroyed at the very start. The only hope was to hunt the wolverine, find him somewhere along the trail and shoot him. As they came near the first trap he was so sure that he would find the trap sprung and the bait torn from the nail that he slackened his speed as though to delay the discovery. Then he stopped, turned back and gripped Tubby's arm. "Look," he said.

The wolverine was thirty or forty yards ahead of them along the trail, standing on stretched hind legs, one forepaw in the trap, the other on the slanting pole. Don looked at it almost in awe; it was fierce and cunning and brave, he knew, mysterious and savage in its ways, bold and cunning yet cautious where caution

was wisdom. Until now it had seemed almost a legendary animal, something that entered the tales of trappers and hunters, that might even—as this one had—rob your own traps and leave its mark along your own trails, but would probably pass out of your knowledge again without being caught or seen. Yet now it was here in front of him, caught almost easily in a simple trap, and he wanted to see it and remember it. He walked closer to it, moving slowly and smoothly because it had not seen him. It was like a small bear at first glance, except for the bushy tail and big paws almost clumsily heavy in proportion to the rest of its body. The fur was beautiful—long dark brown hairs shading to black on the paws and very glossy. It was moving restlessly and almost constantly in the trap and at last it turned and saw him. The little eyes were bold and fearless; the wedge-shaped head with little ears half hidden in the long fur suggested a weasel's ferocity. Facing it at ten or fifteen yards Don still felt an almost superstitious awe. He was tempted to go closer still, but did not; he knew there was ample strength in the shoulder hunched under the long fur to tear the jaws right out of the little trap and he knew there was ample courage in heart and brain to drive the muscles and break the paw free. Don knew he had to kill, kill surely and quickly, yet he was reluctant to do it. Twice he raised the rifle and slowly lowered it again. The wolverine was so alive now, so magnificent in strength and story that it seemed to fill the whole woods; dead

it would only be another small body, twenty-five or thirty pounds of fur and bone and muscle.

He heard Tubby move behind him, raised the rifle again, centered the sights carefully and fired. Tubby was standing at his elbow and Don said: "Gee, I sure hated to do that."

"I know," Tubby said. "I've never seen one before either."

They slept out on the line that night, without blankets, keeping themselves warm by piling wood on a huge fire. The temptation to go on and look at the other new sets on the middle fork line had been too great; they traveled the full length of it and found a single marten and two weasels. Don felt satisfied and optimistic. "We're well away now," he told Tubby. "All we needed was to learn something about the business. When the snow comes we'll make a real killing."

It began to snow again that night and snowed all through the next day while they picked up the traps on the east fork and along the right bank of the river back to the cabin. They were cold and tired when they got in, but it had been a good day and the traps were all up. Don built a great fire in the fireplace and Tubby cooked a big supper and soon the place was warm and comfortable in the candlelight. Don ate and grew warm until he was drowsy. "Gee," he said. "This is good. It almost pays a guy to go out and get cold and wet and hungry so he can come in to something like this."

"So that's why you do it," Tubby said. "I thought you must have some idea back of it all."

Don laughed. "Some day I'll build a cabin up here with hot and cold water and a bath tub. And maybe I'll put in a Pelton wheel—a guy easy could off one of the creeks that come down these side hills."

"Yeah, and marry a wife and get so all around soft you'll never go out at all. How'll you pack the stuff in anyway?"

"Airplane," Don said. "Everything will be planes by then. Quit making it difficult."

"You might be right," Tubby said. "They pack trappers in by plane up north now. But those guys make real dough."

"So'll we. Tomorrow we get these traps out again up the west fork, whether she snows or not. And from then on we'll sit back and let the marten come in."

"I'm not going up the west fork," Tubby said. "I'll go on the middle line all you want, but not the west."

Don sat up straight, his drowsiness gone. "For Pete's sake, Tub, what's the matter with you? First you talk us out of a whole lot of good help, then you say you won't go up the west fork. It just don't make sense."

"Well, I'm not going in there. Not after what happened yesterday."

"O.K.," Don said. "If you're not going in there you can get to heck out of the valley for all I care. All you'll be is a hindrance."

"I'm not going."

"Why not?"

"You know darn well why not. I think you're crazy

to trust that guy the way you do. He didn't want us in here before and he still doesn't want us now. If you ask me, he's not right in the head and that kind's always dangerous."

"You'll snap out of it when you get to know him better. You've got it in for him because he scared you once, that's all. Try and think of the white things he's done—like helping out that time when I wrecked the canoe and coming down here to help me lay out new lines and the way he was over that rock I found."

"Yeah," Tubby said. "He's done swell for you over that—to hear him say it. I'll bet a million bucks to a snake's eye he won't stake any claim for you—and if he does it'll be half a mile away from anything that's worth a darn."

"Suppose he does, I'm still not out any. All I did was pick up a hunk of rock and give it to him."

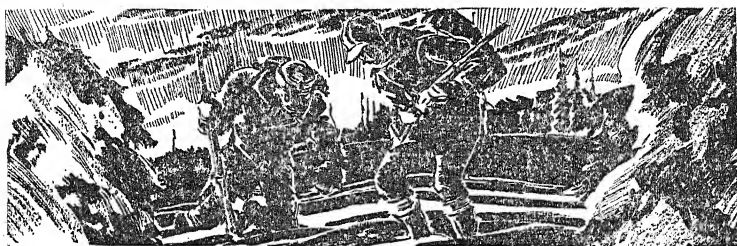
Tubby's eyes opened wide. "Holy gee, what kind of a guy are you? I thought you wanted to get rich in a hurry."

Don laughed. The anger had gone out of him because it was out of Tubby. It'd work out tomorrow some way, he told himself. "I wouldn't turn down a chance to get rich," he said. "But when you've heard prospector's talk as much as I have you won't get hopped up over every guy that thinks he's got a million bucks buried on a sidehill. I'm not worrying anyway. If Lee has got something I'll get my share."

"They ought to think up a new law to protect guys

as simple as you," Tubby said. "Maybe they have and that's how come I'm here."

"You," Don said. "How do you get that way? You couldn't protect my kid brother—if I had a kid brother."



Chapter XIX

NEITHER DON NOR TUBBY REFERRED TO THE ARGUMENT of the night before while they were cooking and eating breakfast next morning. As soon as breakfast was finished Don began to load traps in his packsack and sort out the other stuff he would need. He saw that Tubby was loading his own packsack, but said nothing until he was ready to start. Then he picked up his packsack and slung it on his shoulders. Tubby did the same.

"Where're you going?" Don asked.

"Same place you are."

Don knew he ought to leave it at that, but in spite of himself he said: "I'm going up the west fork, past Jetson's place. Might even stay the night in his cabin."

"Okay, let's go."

"Thought you didn't like that country."

"Oh, lay off, Don. I know when I'm wrong as well as the next guy. I came up here to do what you say and from now on I'm doing it, even when I think you're crazy."

Don laughed. "Now you're talking," he said. "Follow

your old uncle and you won't get in any jackpots—none you don't get out of, anyway."

They worked under snow clouds that day and the day after; on the third day, when most of the traps were out, it began to snow again. When the snow stopped there were twelve or fourteen inches on the ground about the cabin and nearly two feet out at the end of the middle fork line. It was still cold, but they could travel the lines well on snowshoes and there was less discomfort in the dry white snow than in the heavy rains and wet brush of the earlier part of the season. And the traps began to catch. In the first week after the snow they caught six marten and in the second week eight. Don felt proud and satisfied and both he and Tubby worked as they never had before, painstakingly and regularly, over and over the lines.

The whole life of the valley seemed to change with the deep snow and cold. The river was quiet and narrow now, running darkly between the ice crusts on exposed boulders and gravel. The deer moved up from the meadows to search for cedar tops and paw down after salal on the side hills. More cougar came down and one was caught and held in a trap on the middle line; Tubby found him, shot him and brought the skin home in triumph.

In the third week they caught eight more marten, but five of them were females. "We've got to quit pretty soon now," Don told Tubby. "Lee says when you start catching the females you're cutting in on your stock and you've got to watch it."

"If you quit now you won't have enough money to buy Phil's boat," Tubby said.

"We'll have to make her some other way then. There's otters down on the river still and we could put out trail sets for cougars." He thought hard for a moment. The temptation to go on trapping was strong—it seemed they had hardly got started and now it was time to stop. "Tell you what," he said at last. "Tomorrow we'll split up. I'll take some big traps and go out on the middle line and try to make some cougar sets. You see what we've got in the west fork line and if there's more females we'll pull out the marten traps this week. Okay?"

"Sure," Tubby said. "That's fair enough."

It was snowing again the next morning, a light dry snow driven by a hard wind and already drifted high against the side of the cabin. Don told Tubby: "If she's tough don't make a long day of it. Come in early."

"Okay," Tubby said. "I'll do that."

Don watched him out of sight along the trail and then turned up the river towards his own day. He liked the silence of the snow under the sound of the wind, and the harshness of it in his face, and the reach and drive of his snowshoes breaking trail felt good under him. He kept on steadily until he came to the junction, then he began to realize that this was no ordinary snow. The mountains were hidden by it, even the tops of the trees were lost in it. It was light and powdery so that his snowshoes sunk in it almost down to the level of the old snow, and the wind drove it so hard that he could

feel it already seeping between the folds of his clothing. It would be almost impossible to set out new traps and if you did set them out the snow would cover them quickly. He thought for a moment of turning back and wondered what Tubby would be thinking. The west line would have fur in it—they had not been over it for several days—but nothing would move in this weather and nothing would spoil; likely Tubby would turn around early when he saw what it was like and come on home. Again he thought of turning back himself, but he was on the line now, past the first two traps, and it seemed simple to go on. Besides, there was the fresh cougar kill they had found yesterday, halfway along the line. The deer was lying under a big fir windfall, with only a single meal eaten from it; snow would not drift in on traps set there and it was almost a certain catch—the cougar would not travel or kill again in this weather. So he went on and set his traps. Then it seemed simple to go a little farther along the line and check a few more marten sets, but at last he did turn back.

Traveling down the valley, with the wind behind him, was easier and almost pleasant at first. But the new snow was really deep now and still soft, so that he had to lift his feet high at each step and shake away the loose snow that fell in on his shoes. It was almost dark when he came to the cabin and he saw at once that Tubby was not back, because there was no smoke and no light. He went inside and started the fire, then came to the door again to look out. The snow swirled savagely around his feet and he shut the door again and

lit a candle. It was very cold in the cabin and the fine snow had drifted in through tiny crevices and was piled in lines and patterns on the floor. He put a frozen water bucket to thaw out on the stove and lit the other fire; when Tubby came in he would be cold from facing into the storm and he'd be hungry too. But he should be in by now, Don knew; he almost needed to be in, because it was no night for anything to be out—when the animals wouldn't travel a man had no business traveling. For ten or fifteen minutes Don tended his fires and the cabin grew warmer; all the time he thought about Tubby. Likely he'd be in in a few minutes, likely he wasn't more than a few hundred yards away along the trail. Have the place warm for him and supper cooking when he comes. Minutes passed and Tubby did not come. Don loaded food and pitchwood and matches in his packsack. He took out his flashlight, switched it on, then went to the box beside the stove for new batteries. Tubby's flashlight was still in the box.

Don knew then that he had to go out. Nothing was wrong, he told himself. Tubby would be coming along the trail perhaps half a mile from the cabin, perhaps up by the meadows, and by going out now and letting the fires down he would make it miserable for both of them. But just the same a man needed a flashlight to travel in the dark any time and tonight he hadn't got more than an outside chance of staying on the trail without one. Don pulled his heavy mackinaw on again, tightened his bootlaces, strapped on his snowshoes and went



out. He had Tubby's flashlight and a small ax in the packsack and carried his rifle.

The sign of Tubby's passing in the morning was scarcely visible anywhere along the trail now. Don knew the trail well and knew he could not wander far from it without climbing the side hill or working down into the creek bottom, but the snow made it all seem very different and he checked himself regularly by the blazes on the trees; even these were different now, little more than knee high instead of shoulder high as they had been.

He came to the meadows and still had not met Tubby. For the first time he began to worry. It had been dark for nearly an hour and if Tubby had been anywhere on the trail below the head of the meadows in daylight he must have been this far down by now. The only thing was to go on, and Don went on. The snow was still blindingly thick for all its fineness and the going was hard—he realized it was taking a full hour of hard snowshoeing to cover ground he would normally have covered in half the time. Except in very sheltered places he still could not follow Tubby's trail and he began to wonder what to do; unless something had happened to him Tubby must still be somewhere along the trail; but if he were on the trail he should be traveling and should be home by now—unless he had seen it was getting late and decided to turn up and find Jetson's cabin. But Tubby had never been to the cabin and Don knew that he would not go there willingly even if he felt he knew where to look for it.

In spite of that Don crossed at the beaver dam and turned up the game trail when he came to the head of the meadows. There was still no sign that Tubby had come back down the trail and it seemed that he must have gone to Jetson's unless he was in trouble—and if he was in trouble it would be better that two of them look for him. Climbing the hill in the fluffy snow was hard work and it was hard, too, to find the line of the game trail and keep to it, but Don's main concern was to avoid crossing Jetson's trail without seeing it. He began to move cautiously, shining the flashlight about him into the driving mist of snow. He knew almost at once that he was off the game trail, but that did not worry him much because he knew he had to keep climbing the hill. Then one of his snowshoes struck something hard under the snow. He bent down and dug snow away with his rifle until he could see the ragged edge of freshly broken rock in the light of his flash. He shone the light up the hill and recognized the place where he had found the ore sample and Jetson had put in his shots. From there it was easy to find the trail.

He was within ten feet of Jetson's cabin before he could see light from it and he realized then how utterly tired he was. He went round to the door and knocked hard, then heard Jetson's quick movement inside. The door opened and he went in and Jetson closed the door quickly behind him.

"For God's sake," Jetson said. "Where in hell did you come from?" His face was scared and Don saw he had his rifle in his hands. "I couldn't figure who it was."

"I'm looking for Tubby," Don said. "You seen him?"

"You mean he's out in this? Where did he go?"

"Up the line."

Jetson sat down and began to pull on his boots. "Your trail cuts across the flat above the beaver dam, then up on the sidehill beyond here," he said. "How far did you follow it looking for him?"

"Far as the beaver dam. There wasn't any sign of him coming down that far."

"Likely he left it somewhere in the flat and got turned around. That's one easy thing to do in a snow like this. You were lucky you didn't go wrong some place coming up here; a man has no business out in the woods weather like this."

His boots were laced and he reached for his snowshoes. "How's your flashlight?"

"I put in new batteries before I started," Don said. "I've got Tub's here too."

Jetson was ready. "Better drink a cup of coffee before we start out." He reached for the pot on the stove and poured a cup. "You been out all day? When did you last eat?"

"I went up the middle fork," Don said. "Ate before I started up here." He knew he was hungry, but he wanted to be out and looking for Tubby.

Jetson looked at him. "You didn't eat," he said. He reached into a cupboard, threw bacon into a pan on the stove, then cut two thick slices of bread. The bacon scorched quickly on the hot stove and Jetson put it be-

tween the slices of bread and handed them to Don. "Eat that," he said. "We're liable to do some work before we eat again."

Don bit into the sandwich. "I can eat while we're moving," he said. "Let's go."

"No, you can't—not and do yourself any good. Anyway there's no use going baldheaded at it; where'll we look?"

"The trail I guess. Try and find where he turned off—if he did."

"That's about all we can do. I'm pretty sure I can hit through straight along the hill here and find that trail. Think we'll be able to see if he's been over it on his way back?"

"Should be able to," Don said. "A man sinks pretty deep in this stuff, even with snowshoes."

He finished the sandwich and they went out. It was very cold after the warmth of the cabin and Don felt his legs stiff and tired. He wondered about himself for a moment, whether he could be sure of his strength to keep on even if they had to search through the whole night and the next day. But he knew he could; he knew he was very strong and knew that his heart and courage were stronger than his strength because he had proved them. It was good to feel that and important; even if Jetson had not been there he could have done what had to be done, could have driven himself through the storm to search until Tubby was found.

Jetson broke trail steadily ahead of him, traveling easily on his long snowshoes, apparently sure of the

way because he never stopped to look about him. Once he turned to Don. "How're you coming?"

"Fine," Don shouted back against the storm. "Want me to go ahead awhile?"

Jetson shook his head. "Not till we find that trail."

They went on a few hundred yards further, then Jetson stopped and swung his light first to one side then the other. "This is it," he shouted. "And he started back sure enough."

Don came up beside him and looked, but he could see little more than a smooth, shallow depression in the snow. "Blown in on top of his tracks," Jetson said. "Another hour or two and we'd have had a hard time seeing it. Tubby got a gun?"

Don nodded. "Better loose off a few shots," Jetson said. "No, wait till we find where he turned off."

They started along the trail at a good pace, Jetson still leading. They had come off the hill and were half-way across the flat of the valley when Jetson stopped again. "Here," he said. He shone his flashlight on a trail blaze ahead, then swung it to the side and showed Don the faint line of Tubby's tracks. "It's bad country in here," Jetson said. "Flat except for little hummocks that all look alike, and there's half a mile or more between the creek and the sidehill."

"Shall I fire some shots?" Don asked.

"Might as well. He could be within a hundred feet of us easy as not."

Don fired three shots and they listened, but there were no answering shots. Jetson went on, very care-

fully now, following Tubby's trail. It was a very dim and feeble trail without the blazes to confirm it, but Jetson seemed able to keep on it and after a little he said: "Look at that."

Don looked and saw that another trail had cut across the one they were following; it seemed clearer and fresher. "What is it?" he asked.

"He circled back on himself," Jetson said. "We ought to find him quick now."

They went on again, traveling faster until Jetson said: "Fire another shot."

Don fired. Almost at once they heard a shout, faint on the wind, behind them and to the left. "That's him," Jetson said and started towards the sound. They found Tubby on his feet, sheltering behind a big fir root. He had dug away the snow with one of his snowshoes and it was piled around him in a high bank.

"You all right, Tub?" Don called to him.

"Sure," Tubby said, but he was so cold he could hardly speak. "How in heck did you guys find me?"

"Nothing to it," Don said. "Not when you're with someone that can follow a trail the way Lee here can. Can you walk out?"

"Guess so," Tubby said. "That's all I've been doing since I knew I wouldn't get out, walking up and down behind this darn root trying to keep warm. I only had six matches and I wasted 'em all."

"Better get started," Jetson said. "You can talk when we get to the cabin. I'll go ahead, Tubby in the middle, you last, Don."

It was two o'clock in the morning when they reached Jetson's cabin. Don looked at Tubby and saw that his eyes were staring for sleep and his face was white with strain. Jetson was lighting the fire. "Get his clothes off and roll him in some blankets," he said. "I'll give him a good dose of hot rum and he'll sleep till tomorrow afternoon."



Chapter XX

DON WOKE UP BUT DID NOT LET HIMSELF COME FULL awake. He knew he was in a strange place, he remembered it was Jetson's cabin, but he had an uneasy feeling about waking up there and he wanted to get things straight in his mind. It was quiet outside and very light inside the cabin, light right out to the corners from the brightness of piled snow under the windows and in the woods. He heard someone moving about the cabin and saw, without turning his head, that it was Jetson. They had put Tubby to bed in the lower part of the double decker at the far end of the cabin. Jetson had slept above him. And he, Don, was bunked under a bear rug and odds and ends of bedding on what normally served the cabin as a couch—a piece of canvas laced on to a framework of poles.

Don remembered what had happened the day before and knew he was worried because Tubby was here in Jetson's cabin and Tubby wouldn't like it—Jetson probably wouldn't like it either and Don didn't blame him. If Tubby acted the way he had last time there would be a miserable hour before they could get away. Don

knew he felt bad too, because his own carelessness had really let Tubby into trouble; neither of them should have gone out in the storm, and certainly they should not have gone out separately. Then he thought: What the heck, nobody got hurt and it was all kind of exciting and good experience. And if Tubby wants to act mean this morning I'm going right after him and shut him up. He wondered what time it was and sat up to look.

"Hello there," Jetson said. "Sleep all right?"

Don looked at the clock. "Noon," he said. "Holy smoke, I should say I did. Why didn't you give a guy a shout?"

"Haven't been up so long myself," Jetson said. "We needed sleep. Can you eat breakfast?"

Don swung his legs to the floor. "You're darn right I can. Two of 'em."

Tubby woke up as they were sitting down at the table. He sat up suddenly, looked around the cabin and blinked in the strong light. "Gee," he said, "I dreamed I was sitting down to bacon and coffee and there's you guys doing just that."

They didn't talk much while they were eating, but when the meal was almost over Don said: "I'm sorry about yesterday, Tub. It was my fault."

"How come?" Tubby asked. "I'm the guy that pulled the fool play."

"We should have stayed home weather like that. I just got so hopped up about those marten lines I didn't stop to think about it."

Jetson watched them, saying nothing. He was smiling a little. "I'd have been O.K.," Tubby said. "If it hadn't of been for those darn wolves. They near to scared the pants off me."

"They turned off near as quick as you did," Jetson said. "How many did you see?"

"Hold it a minute," Don said. "Maybe I'm just dumb but this is the first time I've heard anything about wolves."

Jetson laughed. "Tubby met a bunch on the trail—that's how he came to turn off. You could see the place just ahead when they'd been milling around and there were tracks of two or three of 'em leading real close to the trail. Now you tell it, Tubby."

"I don't know much more than that," Tubby said. "I counted eight—maybe more. One great big guy—black he looked—right in the middle of the trail. Two or three others behind him and more just off on the side. I got scared and figured I better hit for some place where I could get backed up against something. Had a heck of a time to find a place, but I found one all right, a dandy. Then they didn't come, so I started back for the trail and just naturally didn't get there."

"Well," Don said. "For the love of Pete. You could have shot a couple anyway. They'd have run."

Tubby flushed and looked down at his hands. "No shells," he said. "I forgot to take any when I started out. Forgot the waterproof matchbox and the flashlight too—that's why it's really my fault." He looked up at Don. "You know what I mean. How I said the night

before I wouldn't go out, then I went off in a hurry when I saw you all set to start."

They were all silent for a long half minute. Then Jetson said: "I knew those wolves were somewhere up the valley. This snow'll bring 'em right down and they'll sure murder a pile of deer."

"Listen," Tubby said. "Let's not go off it yet. I know you guys saved my life last night. I was walking up and down behind that root to keep warm, but I couldn't have kept at it much longer. Don took a big chance starting out like that alone in the dark, and there wasn't any reason you should help, Mr. Jetson, after the way I was last time. I sure am grateful."

"Forget it," Jetson said. "The name's Lee."

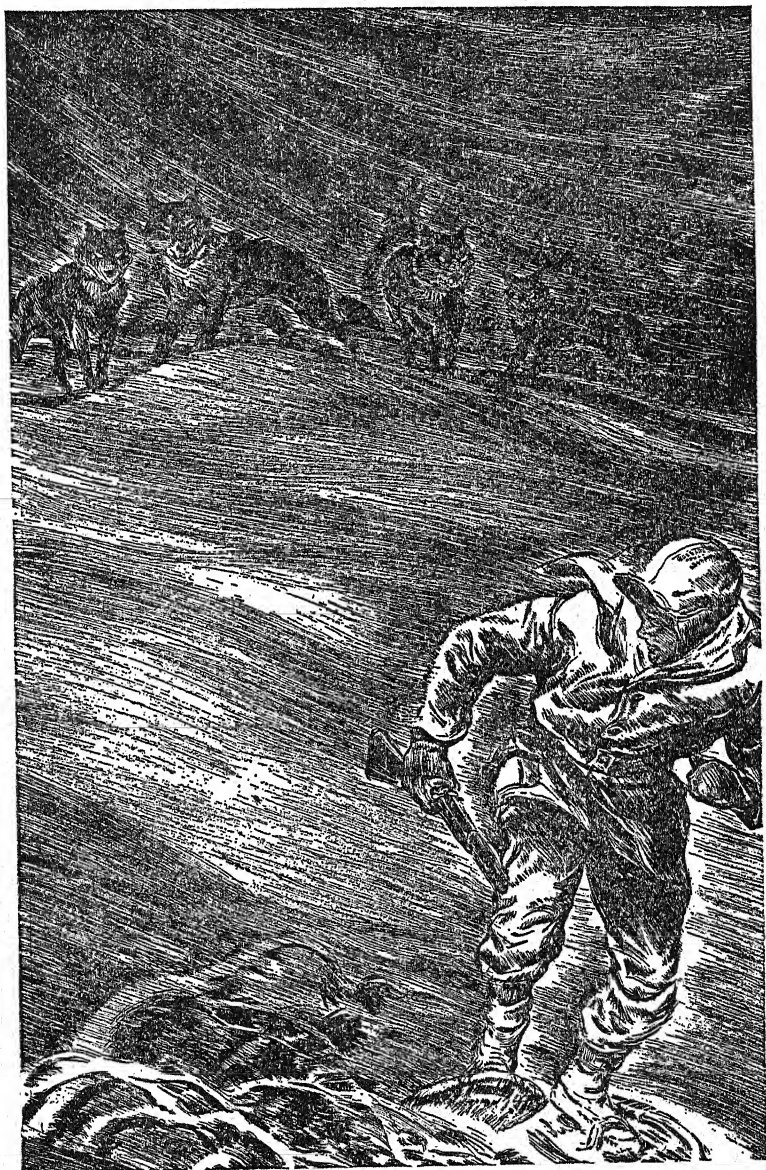
"I couldn't have found you," Don said. "I thought I could when we started out, but I know now I'm not man enough to follow a track that's nothing more than a hollow in the snow sometimes. It was Lee did that."

Tubby looked straight at Jetson. "Thanks," he said. "And I'm sorry for the way I acted down at the cabin. I've been sort of sorry ever since it happened."

"That wasn't anything," Jetson said. "I could have done some explaining and I guess I should have, seeing I was in the wrong first. I'll do it now if you want to hear."

Don leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Let's go right to town on her and get it all straight," he said. "Nobody's going to dig out traps today anyway."

Jetson pulled a can of tobacco towards him and Don saw his fingers were trembling as he began to roll



"I counted eight," Tubby said, "maybe more"

a cigarette. "I guess most people around here figure I'm kind of queer," he said slowly. "Unsociable and sour and mean. Maybe there's something to it—maybe they've got a right to figure that way. When I came up here I'd had a bellyful of friends—" Jetson spoke the word so that it hurt—"and all I wanted was to get out in some piece of back country and mind my own business my own way and have other people mind theirs." He stopped to light his cigarette and Don saw his hands were still shaking. He had not looked up since he started to speak, but he looked at Tubby now. "Some of the reason for that is in what you said the other night, about me killing a guy. Sure, I killed a guy, but not the way they tell it around here. I stood my trial for it and didn't run away—I hadn't any reason to run. But that's getting ahead of myself and it's not the real reason I acted the way I did when you boys came in here—though I guess it's what got Tubby convinced I was a bad actor."

Tubby tried to say something but Jetson shook his head. "It wasn't your fault," he said. "If Don here wasn't so darn easy-going he'd have figured the same way you did and I guess 'most everybody else does. Before I came up here I used to be in the country Don comes from—eastern Washington, and back in Idaho and Montana too. I've heard talk of your Dad, Don, but I never run across him—not to know it anyway. I was the same way he was, a prospector and a hard rock miner when I needed a grubstake, except I hadn't got a family to figure on so I could stay with the hills

pretty steady most times. I had a good reputation too and it got so real good businessmen would want to stake me to go out for them and I didn't have to worry much about working for wages unless I wanted to."

Jetson reached out for his tobacco can again and went on with his story. "All this was back around '27 and '28—you know how it'd be then, or maybe you don't. Money didn't mean much; everything was spend money and rush, keep busy as a pup with a rubber ball, do this and that and the other thing all at the same time. I couldn't go into Spokane or any other town but what there'd be guys—big shots too—after me to go out here or go out there or some place else they'd heard about. Most times I wouldn't go because I was working on something for myself, same as I am here. I was good and sure it was the right kind of prospect, but I couldn't seem to get it figured out straight. All the times I'd hit into little pockets of stuff instead of something big, but I knew darn well something big was there and I meant to stay with it till I found her."

Jetson told his story slowly and painfully, as though he had thought it many times but never spoken it before, as though it wouldn't go straight into words and all the words he could find stifled it. He had taken a partner, a big blond bullet-headed man named Alfred Farzon. Murray Baker had suggested it and found the man. Murray Baker was a businessman who had a string of flower shops all up and down the Pacific Coast and he had sent Jetson out into the hills for himself several times, always treating him with a large and showy

generosity. Jetson took Alf Farzon back to his pet prospect and they worked together on it for several months. Then Baker sent word to Jetson that he had a proposition for him and Jetson went down to hear about it. There was something good back of Black Canyon in Montana, Baker said, something big going to break there before long and he wanted a man there to get in on the ground floor—maybe Jetson could go in right now and look around and find something even before the break came. It would be hard to get a line on it, because the men that were in on it were playing it real close.

Jetson hadn't wanted to go. He was getting near what he was looking for, he said, and he wanted to stay with it. Baker had argued hard, had begged him "as a friend" to go into Black Canyon, had told him it was time for him to branch out and go to work on several things at a time instead of just a one horse show. Jetson remembered that conversation well and he stopped to ask Don and Tubby: "Did you ever hear tell of the One Horse Mine? Silver and lead she is, and a good one."

"Sure," Don said. "I've heard my old man say the name over and over; the way he'd say it you'd think he was talking about God or something."

Jetson smiled. "He was talking about something big all right. When they get her all opened up she's liable to be the biggest of her kind in the world. I think she stacks up somewhere around third or fourth right now.

You'll see where it comes into what I'm telling you later on."

Jetson had agreed at last to do what Baker wanted and had gone off into the Black Canyon country. He found rumors there, vague and uncertain rumors always centering on a big strike of some kind far back in the hills. He followed them out faithfully and even found a showing that seemed worth staking in one place, but there was never any concrete sign of the activity Baker had talked about. So in the end Jetson came out and made his report to Baker in Spokane. Baker was short with him and seemed angry and suspicious for some reason, but Jetson put that down to the uncertain temper of a big man and went off to find Farzon at his own claims.

"I got into the cabin about dark one night," he said. "Alf was standing in the doorway waiting for me and when I got up there he said: 'What call you got to come in here?' I thought he was kidding and I said: 'Not much. I just figure to lay her open half a mile wide and deep as the mountain.' But he wasn't kidding; he said: 'That's what we done, sucker, but you ain't got no part in it. Now get out of here. And fast.'"

Jetson had gone. He had thought at first that Farzon was crazy, then he learned that big interests had moved in and staked claims all through the country he had worked and set men to work there. Farzon was employed as a watchman at the cabin.

"You mean you hadn't staked anything up there before you went away?" Don asked.

"I'd staked all right," Jetson said. "But I hadn't recorded anything because I couldn't seem to get satisfied with the way any of it looked. I wanted to be good and sure I had picked her right. There wasn't anything I had found even nearly as good as I figured must be in there somewhere, and a poor man can't afford to go out and stake a whole country the way a big man can. So the lawyers told me I hadn't got a darn thing and I'd better lay off."

He paused for a moment and sat looking out of the window at the snow. "I guess I should have laid off then, but I didn't. I went back in there with an old partner of mine, Fred Tooley, and tried to talk Alf Farzon into going witness for me how I was in there first or if he wouldn't do that at least to tell who his boss was. We didn't get to first base. Farzon had a bunch of gorillas with him and they run us off the place."

On the way out they had to pass under a steep rock slope on a narrow trail and a small avalanche of rocks came down at them. "That's where I got this," Jetson pointed to the scar on his forehead. "And when I came to Fred was lying alongside of me and he says: 'They're shooting at us, Lee.' I heard a bullet then, and another one right after it. I could see them up on the hill, movin' around and looking and getting ready to shoot again. It wasn't hard to pick out Alf Farzon from his size and you could even see the shape of his head against the light. I picked him out good—drilled him right be-

tween the eyes and he came rollin' down the hill dead as a rock himself. The rest of 'em run off then."

"Holy smoke," Tubby said. "What did you do after that?"

"Stood trial," Jetson said. "There wasn't much to it because the gorillas had run off and left Alf right where he was. He was still there when we came back in with the cops. But I got so as I didn't feel good in that country any more, so I moved on up here."

Jetson got up and walked across to the window. "I guess that's about all there is to it," he said. "It doesn't sound so much when you tell it—not enough to make a guy act the way I did." He turned around and faced them. "I used to hate a guy that was suspicious more than any other kind. And now I've turned that way—suspicious and mean. Maybe I've lived alone too much and I'm kind of crazy; I wouldn't know, but people sure make it easy for you to be alone too much if they think they've got something on you."

"We'll put 'em straight if we hear 'em talking," Don said. "Won't we, Tub?"

"Sure will," Tubby said. "I guess you had a right to act suspicious if any guy ever did. And I made more of it than it was."

"The thing that got me was finding Don here was Dan Morgan's son," Jetson said. "But that time at the meadows I didn't shoot closer'n twenty feet, honest. I made good and sure nobody was going to be hurt."

"I guess we know that," Don said. "One thing nobody ever tries to talk down around here is how you

can shoot. But listen, what about that One Horse Mine? You said it came into the story later."

"That's what they called it," Jetson said. "One Horse Mine. Murray Baker owned the biggest part of it till he died a couple of years back."

"Gee," Tubby said. "That's sure quite a story. But maybe you'll make her this time, right on this mountain here."

Jetson's face brightened. "You bet your life we will," he said. "All three of us'll make her—she's plenty big enough for that. But first off we've got to see Don makes his stake to buy that boat he's so set on. How's she coming, Don?"

"Kind of close," Don said. "But not close enough. We've been getting females in the traps for a couple of weeks now—real bad last week and we've got to pull 'em out, I guess. The only chance now is cougars; twenty bucks for the bounty and maybe something for the hide soon mounts up if you can pick 'em up, and this snow sure ought to bring them down."

"There's something else packs a bounty," Jetson said. "Wolves."

"That bunch Tubby saw? You think we could get some of them?"

"Sure, if you go the right way about it."

"How's that? Traps?"

"You could maybe get some in traps. Better'n that, hunt them—weather like this. A man can sometimes make a killing that way."

"You mean just get out in the brush and hunt them the way you would a buck?" Don asked.

"Still hunt," Jetson said. "Get to know the way they're working the country and lay for 'em."

"Boy," Don said. "That sounds good. You mean you'd really get to see them, out in the open, where you can shoot?"

"If you work it right. It may not be as easy as all that, but there's times when you can clean up every last one of a bunch like those Tubby saw."



Chapter XXI

THE WEATHER HELD COLD AFTER THE SNOW, REALLY cold and with bright sun that burned the face and strained the eyes even under the timber. The deer sought out the southern slopes and open places and herded there to feed; the cougars followed them down and there were tracks everywhere, along the river below the junction, up the south fork and along the middle fork line. Don and Tubby worked steadily, putting out traps on likely trails or around fresh kills, and occasionally building bait sets. In the first week after the snow they caught five. Then for several days they caught nothing. Tubby said: "Gee, I sure wish we had Ray here with his dogs. Couldn't we get him?"

"Snow's too deep," Don said. "A dog'd have a heck of a time to travel. Ray'll keep down near salt water where it isn't so deep. We ain't doing so bad anyway. We'll pick up a few more before it's time to pull out."

"How about the west fork for a change?"

"We'll go up there tomorrow. There won't be cougars if the wolves are still working it, but we could always go after the wolves like Lee said."

"You think that'd work?"

"I don't see why not; and if we could make a real clean-up we'd have her made for sure."

They started up the west fork just before sunrise next morning. When they had gone a little way Tubby said: "You going right through to Lee's place now?"

"I dunno. We might look around some for ourselves first. Why? You still scared of him?"

"No. It's not that. I just don't feel right about going along to ask him for more help after all he's done and the things I said to him that time. I know what you mean about the way he is when you see him close and get to know him. That guy hurts easy and from what he told us I sure figured out the best way to hurt him."

"I know what you mean," Don said. They walked awhile in silence before he went on. "He reminds you of the way a coon is in a trap—kind of brave, but scared and hurt; not sticking his neck out any, but ready to scrap if you come too close. And you want to let him go." Again they walked in silence until Don seemed suddenly to remember what they were talking about. "But, heck, you don't need to worry about that," he said. "Lee's no guy to bear a grudge. You two had that all out straight last time we were up."

"I know," Tubby said. "But I still feel lousy about it. Here a guy has tough luck and moves on to a new place and everybody gets talking behind his back and spreading rumors about him. And I have to help out with that."

"Some of it's his own fault. He says he didn't aim to

make friends when he came up here and you said what you thought to his face, not behind his back."

"I know, I know. But it still makes you feel like dirt. I guess I'll get it worked out sometime, but I sure wish it hadn't happened."

They went on past the head of the meadows and out along the marten line. The snow had settled a good deal so that snowshoeing was almost easy and the blazes on the trees showed up fairly well. There was no sign of the wolves until they had crossed the flat and begun to climb the slope on Jetson's side of the valley. Then a straight line of torn and scattered snow cut across the trail almost at right angles. The tracks were several days old, heading down the valley, and the spread pad-marks showed clearly that the wolves had been running. Don searched the trampled snow carefully and at last found what he was looking for—the mark of a big buck's hoof under the wide pad-marks and neat claw pricks of the wolves. "Looks like we've got a start," he told Tubby. "They're still hunting from farther up the valley, working down. Likely as not that buck was heading for some special place where he figured he had a chance to shake 'em off—in the creek maybe; it's still running at the far end of the meadows. Any other buck they run from around the same place is liable to figure the same thing, and that's where we ought to get a chance."

A hundred yards farther on they found the tracks again, but they were fresher this time. "Sometime yesterday," Don said. "Couldn't be longer ago than that."

He tried to judge the number of wolves in the pack by looking for differences in the pad-marks, but he gave it up quickly. "Seems like one or maybe two of them are bigger than the others, but that's all I can tell. How many did you say you saw on the trail?"

"Eight, I figured. But they kept moving back and forth and it was hard to be sure. Besides, I was plenty scared."

Don laughed. "If you'd had shells would you have shot at 'em?"

"Darned if I know," Tubby said. "The way I was shaking I wouldn't have hit much. But if there'd been shells in the gun I might not have waited long enough to get started shaking."

"I guess you won't forget it in a long time. That's one story that'll give the Miller grandchildren bad dreams."

"You're darn right," Tubby said. "She ought to be a real good one by that time."

They crossed the wolf tracks once more as they climbed the hill and these also were heading down on a long angle towards the meadows. But they found them again after the trail had swung along the sidehill, crossing straight down now, from left to right instead of from right to left. "That's bad," Don said. "They must have killed somewhere in the flat those times."

"They wouldn't need to have," Tubby said. "They could have swung along the hill and made those other tracks we saw on the same hunt."

"That's right too," Don said. "I hadn't thought of

that. Gee, I'd sure like to see 'em come now, right in broad daylight." He swung his rifle up and sighted on a snow-piled stump. "A man'd have to do some good shooting to get the whole eight of 'em."

"They wouldn't wait for that," Tubby said. "I don't see how you'd make more'n one or two even if you got the breaks."

"Sometimes they do wait. I've heard Steve Hardy tell about killing six without moving his two feet. He said they just hung around and didn't pay any attention at all to the shooting till they got hit."

"That'd never happen to us, with the luck we got."

It was late afternoon when they reached the end of the line and Tubby said: "What now? Do you want to go on up the valley and see if there's any more sign of them? It'll be dark long before we can get to the cabin, so we'll have to sleep out anyway."

Don shook his head. "No, there'll be a moon; we could make it all right. But we won't. We'll go to Lee's place."

"Heck," Tubby said. "Do we have to?"

"Sure. Lee'll know more'n we do about the way the wolves are working. If we stop by there he's going to expect us to stay—he'd just naturally be offended if we didn't. And we need to stay with him; it's the easiest way we can check on the wolves and we can make a start on digging out those marten traps and picking them up. Season'll be out first thing we know."

"O.K.," Tubby said. "You're the boss."

It was dark when they came to Jetson's, but he met

them in the doorway. "Supper's cooking, boys," he said. "Come on in."

"How did you know we were coming?" Don asked him.

"I saw where you'd gone up this morning. You'd have been mighty poor sort of neighbors if you hadn't stopped in."

Tubby was watching him closely. Jetson's welcome had been so friendly and natural that he felt at ease and comfortable, but he could not hold back the question that came into his mind. "How do you come to know what we're doing all the time? Seems like we haven't made a move anywhere in the valley all winter without you knew about it."

Jetson looked up, holding a fork over the frying pan. "Habit, I guess it is," he said. "We used to do it when we were kids back in Montana. The old man was pure hunter from away back and Indian fighter too. Any time we'd come into the house he'd say: 'Well, boys, what's bin movin' since yesterday?' He'd want to know about every doggone thing down to a coyote and up to a man; seemed he wouldn't rest quiet unless he did."

"You mean from tracks?" Don asked.

"Sure, tracks was what counted most. My brother and me seen where a bunch of horses had gone through one day, about ten miles from the ranch house, but we didn't see there was a rider with 'em. Turned out they was stolen and the guy with 'em was the thief. The old man whaled the tar out of us for not lookin' good."

"Holy smoke," Don said. "I guess that would kind of give a guy a habit."

"That wasn't the only time. He wanted to know things right and know 'em all—mostly about our own cattle and where they was feeding and so on. But other stuff, too, that didn't need to be any of his business, except he said it was always a man's business to know anything that was happening near enough to hurt him. There's something to it, at that."

"You're darn right there is," Don said. "You can thank Lee's dad for the way he found you the other night. A man doesn't learn to track in snow like that just from following up a buck once in a while."

Supper was on the table and they sat down to it. Don said: "How about the wolves, Lee? We figured they'd been hunting off the hill here down towards the meadows most of the time. That right?"

"Close to it," Jetson said. "You'll hear 'em tonight, likely. But there's two packs—one over on the other sidehill; that lot hasn't come down so far yet."

"What'll we do?"

"Lay for 'em. It won't be too easy because they seem to work nights and they kill in the timber all the time—the deer head out for the meadows all right, but the snow's so darn soft they never get there."

Don and Tubby and Jetson hunted the wolves for the next three days. In daylight they learned what they could of the habits of the pack from signs in the snow and each night, as the moon came up, they went down to the valley floor to wait and listen in the hope that

they would be able to intercept the pack at some point or come up with them after they had killed. But, as Jetson had warned them, it was not easy. Jetson's woodcraft gradually revealed to them the pattern of the wolf pack's hunting. For the most part the deer were to be found on the sharp ridges from which the wind had swept the fine snow as it fell, or on the few slopes of the hillside that caught the full warmth of the afternoon sun. Three or four members of the pack would hunt such places until a deer was started and these, generally, would run the deer while the others kept well out on the flanks to cut off a sudden turn or circle.

Once, when they had found the tracks of these flanking wolves and followed the hunt through to the stained and trodden snow of the kill, Jetson asked Don: "Do you notice something?"

"Sure do," Don said. "The darn deer runs pretty near straight every time instead of circling. I thought they always circled, except maybe an awful wise old buck."

"They do," Jetson said. "That's the reason those wolves are out to one side. But I've noticed before up here that when a deer's scared he nearly always heads down for the meadows."

"Why's that?" Don asked. "To get out in the open?"

"Search me," Jetson said. "I've done a pile of figuring about it and never could make up my mind. Those meadows are like deer heaven—lots of good feed there all the time except right now and the cougars can't sneak up too darn close without being seen. Pretty near

every deer in the valley seems to head up in there most months—you found that out for yourselves before you could kill a buck to eat. It could be that's why they light out for 'em when they're in trouble."

"What else do you think?" Tubby asked. "I can tell that isn't all by the way you say it."

Jetson smiled. "Gee, you sure watch me close, Tubby. You got me just about scared to say anything."

Tubby flushed. "I didn't mean it that way. . . ."

"I know you didn't. I was kidding. No, I've seen the same thing other places when there was a lake in the bottom of a valley about like the meadows are here. The deer'd drive right down for the lake soon as they were run and swim across it. I've even seen wolves figure that one out and leave the daddy of the pack on the far side of the lake to pull the deer down when he climbed out. They could do it easy with him all tired from swimming. What I figured was that those meadows must have been a lake not so awful many years ago. Could be these deer now have got the same habit the other deer had when the lake was there—sort of inherited maybe."

Don shook his head. "I still think you were nearer right the first time. They figure it's safe because it's open. Sure ought to be a help to us though. If we hang around the edge of the meadows long enough we've pretty near got to run into them."

They waited each night down in the bottom of the valley, a few hundred yards above the meadows, because that was where most of the kills were made—

Jetson said the depth of the snow slowed the deer and let the wolves pull them down before they could reach the meadows, but he was still sure that was where they were trying to go. Each night they heard the wolves on the hunt—not a great cry of music such as hounds would have made, but occasional howls, sharp and excited. On the second night they heard the pack howling somewhere up on the hillside and climbed eagerly to find them—then heard them on the hunt somewhere far below. On the third night the pack killed near the edge of the swamp. Jetson had followed the hunt through to its finish by some mysterious sense of his own and he moved quickly over to where Don and Tubby were waiting two or three hundred yards away. He told them that the wolves had killed and that he thought they could come up with them while they were still feeding.

Don said: "Let's go," and he and Tubby followed close on Jetson's swift, silent snowshoe steps in the shadowy moonlight of the timber. Jetson led for ten or fifteen minutes without hesitation, then he stopped and listened. He shook his head at last: "Can't hear 'em," he said and led on again. A hundred yards farther on he stopped and once more a hundred yards from there. This second time Don saw his body stiffen and heard himself a faint sound somewhere ahead and to the left. Jetson pointed towards the sound, listened for a moment longer, then started out again, more cautiously and slowly this time.

They knew for certain that they were coming up

on the wolves when they were still some distance away. Low fierce growls, the sharp crack of splintering bones and once a single yelp of pain sounded clearly in the stillness of the timber. Jetson motioned the two boys close to him. "They're hard to see," he said. "Shoot fast if you get a chance. Try and keep level with me from here in." To Don it seemed that their snowshoes were suddenly loud against the snow and their clothes rustled and creaked with every movement. He felt his heart inside him, strong and loud in his ears, but he had felt that before and knew it could not be heard outside him. They came to a big windfall on top of the snow and turned to pass round it; there was a cloud over the face of the moon and they waited for that to pass; waiting, they knew suddenly that the wolves were silent. Don tried to see Jetson's face in the faint light, then Jetson signaled and they moved on again. They were very close now to where the sounds had been. Don saw a shadow move, jerked his rifle up and could find neither sights nor shadow. The cloud passed and left the moon bright again so that they could see the trampled snow and scattered bones. Jetson spoke aloud: "Keep watching," he said. "They may be just back in the shadows." The three of them waited, close together, each facing outward, rifle ready. Nothing moved. "We were too late," Jetson said at last. "If we could have got here right after they killed they'd never have pulled out that easy."

Don felt a sudden weight of disappointment. "Darn the luck anyway," he said. "We could hang around

here a hundred nights and never come that close again."

"It's tough in the timber," Jetson said. "Too hard to see, too hard to travel and even bad for hearing. But they'll kill in the open one night and you'll get your chance then."

"By that time there'll be no moon—and no snow either, likely," Don said.

"Not quitting, are you?" Jetson asked.

"No. Getting mighty discouraged just for tonight. Let's hit for home."

Jetson was listening again. "Hear that?" he asked.

From the other side of the valley there was a sudden flurry of fierce howling, strong-voiced and menacing; suddenly it stopped. Then a single wolf howled; then another. "That's the other lot," Jetson said. "They've killed too. Want to go up?"

Don looked at Tubby. "Sure," Tubby said.

But Jetson shook his head. "Too far. 'Way too far. Nothing for it but to go home and hit the hay."

They woke up late the next day—even Jetson, for once, had slept until almost noon. Don felt restless and impatient; the disappointment of the night before was still with him and he had a gloomy feeling of failure—not just the failure of that one hunt, but of the effort of the whole winter. Too much had depended on the wolves and now it seemed to him that last night had stretched hunting luck to its limit; even if there should be another chance of creeping up on the pack while it was feeding, the wolves would be more wary, quicker to fade back into the shadows. He thought of the

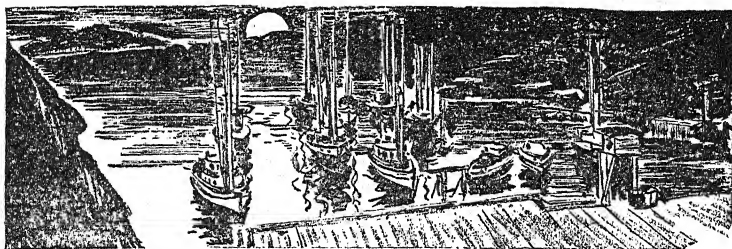
Mallard and wondered if Phil could wait for part of his money until later in the season—certainly he couldn't—he had to put down the full price of the *Mallard* to take over his new boat—but it made a slight, possible hope. He thought of the wolves again. Suddenly he said: "I'm going over across the valley this afternoon."

Tubby looked up in surprise. "What for?"

"To see if I can find that other bunch." He turned to Jetson and spoke almost pleadingly. "A guy could happen to run into them in daylight, the way Tub did, couldn't he?"

"If you've got a hunch," Jetson said. "You play it. Want us to come along?"

"No. I'll meet you down at the meadows soon after dark. Right at the meadows, near the head on this side, where the old cedar snag is down."



Chapter XXII

DON FELT BETTER ALMOST AS SOON AS HE WAS AWAY from the cabin. It was a sparkling afternoon, with a light breeze that was cold even under the sun, yet charged with a feeling of change. Feeling it against his face, Don thought: This can't go on the way it is; there's going to be a thaw and rain, heavy rain, and the snow will rot and break down, grow dull and dirty and dead and at last disappear. Then it will be spring and time to get the boat ready and think of fishing again. He thought: It's queer to be thinking that when it all looks as though it would last forever and never change, when the wind is still cold and the snow is hard and bright and the sky is clear, but there must be something to it or a man wouldn't think it.

When he was across the flat he set to work to climb the far slope eagerly and hopefully. It was new country and he was tired of the old country on the other slope, where they had hunted so often that they could hardly travel a hundred yards without crossing their own tracks again. Snow shouldn't stay on the ground that long, he told himself—not without a fresh fall

to clear it of old marks anyway. It wasn't natural.

He climbed the hillside at a long angle, traveling always towards the head of the valley. The country was steep, broken into benches and rock bluffs, and the snow was still drifted deeply and smoothly over it—the wind had come down and across the valley from south and west and even the clear sun of the days since the storm had not yet been able to expose the buried brush. For this reason there were few signs of deer on the hillside and Don had climbed a thousand feet or more above the valley before he came on the first wolf track. It was a single track, leading down the hill, and he did not follow it. A few hundred yards farther on he found the broken trail of the main body of the pack, leading in the same direction. This time he turned up, back-tracking the wolves. He had no clear idea of what he wanted to do, and no great hope that he would find anything, but the best chance seemed to be to follow them back to where they had started from. He wondered what they did when they were not hunting. You'd expect them to sleep on full bellies near their kill, but after a while they'd wake and grow restless again. They might start to hunt right away, but more likely they'd be playful and careless, travel along easily back to some sunny place on the bluffs and lie there through the day, stretched out and lazy until hunger set them to hunting again.

The clear back track led Don quickly another five or six hundred feet up the hill, then the main track split up into several single tracks—the wolves had

hunted singly, closing in to the one that started the deer as soon as his excitement summoned them. Don picked a single track and tried to follow it, but it roamed back and forth across the hillside until he grew impatient and picked his own way straight up.

The hill flattened off about twenty-five hundred feet above the valley. On top of it the trees were smaller and more scattered and there were narrow flat swamps in hollows between rough hillocks that Don judged were rock outcrop under the snow. It didn't seem likely country for the wolves, but it was new country and different from any he had seen lately. He had something of the feeling he had had when he first took his canoe through the Shifting River canyon, that he was seeing what few people, perhaps no one, had seen before, and this sense of discovery drew him on till he was facing straight into a red sun poised just over the peaks that headed the valley. The air was very cold now, with a stretched tightness of frost and a bleak little wind that came and went as though its uncertainty were a signal for the change of light. Don suddenly wanted warmth and human voices, firelight and supper and the enclosure of cabin walls; he was very far from all of them, so he turned sharply back.

He traveled back along the ridge for a mile or more and when he turned down on to the sidehill the moon was already big and bright ahead of him and the shadows of the trees were velvet black on the face of the snow. The snow held him up well and he traveled effortlessly, with a feeling of power and strength that

made him forget everything in the sheer joy of movement. The first howl of the wolves stopped him short, turned half around on the sidehill to face back towards it. It was close and the sudden high sound of it seemed to ruffle the skin of his face and freeze his muscles. For a long half minute he stood absolutely still. Then he worked the lever of his rifle fiercely to drive a shell into the breech. He moved his feet a little, felt his muscles relax and knew he was ready.

The howl was not repeated and nothing moved on the hill above him. Don hesitated. He could go back, but if the wolf had seen him or scented him it would never show itself. If he went on and they were hunting he would hear them again. He went on. Before he had covered a hundred yards he heard the howl again, still behind him and above him on the hill. This time it was answered almost at once, from farther down the hill and again from a much farther distance. Once more Don waited and watched the track of his snowshoes out of sight into the shadows, but nothing moved. The first wolf howled again, still from the same place, and this time it was answered from half a dozen places all over the sidehill. In spite of himself Don felt dry-mouthed terror. He wanted to watch all ways at once, he wanted to go back and face them or to turn and run frantically down the hill. The distant wolves were closer now and the nearer ones had moved, still keeping about the same distance from him but working up on the sides to complete the semi-circle, with one directly above him and one directly below him on the hillside.

Don waited, stock still, his rifle ready, his eyes straining into the broken moonlight. The wolves still howled, but at longer intervals now and they seemed to have stopped moving. The one directly below him howled again and he tried to judge from the sound how far it was away; perhaps two or three hundred yards, he thought, perhaps more. There was a long silence, then the howling started again, but still there had been no movement. Don made up his mind. He started off straight down the hill, towards the wolf that had howled below him, traveling as swiftly and silently as he could. He came to the edge of a steep bluff and knew he had to turn aside; he turned along the hill towards the west, back into the semicircle of wolves instead of east towards the meadows. As he went down he watched closely, hoping to see the wolf cross in front of him, but again he could see no movement. When he was sure he had gone far enough and there was no chance that the wolf would offer a shot he began to hurry—not wildly, but calmly, making the best use of the ground, picking steep clear places where he could run and slide on his snowshoes, stepping out in his fine, strong striding whenever the ground leveled off. So he came to the crest of a sharp break-off, swung a little sideways and jumped to give power and control to his slide. Without warning the harness of his right shoe broke.

Don almost fell, recovered himself and stood still, the shoe twisted on his foot. He looked back over his shoulder and listened. There was no sound behind him,

but he did not like the place—the crest of the slope, close above him, sharply cut his range of vision. He climbed back on to the bench, listened again and knelt to look at the damage.

It was not easy to see close things in the moonlight under the timber, but he pulled off his gloves and felt with his fingers until he knew that the strap across his instep was broken at the hole where the buckle held it. Then he heard a wolf howl well over on his right. Another answered from the left and the others took up the call in the same semicircle as before. They seemed closer this time, but still beyond sight, and as they howled again he knew they were not moving in. For the first time he fully accepted the fact that they were following him, not just ranging the hillside in search of more promising game.

He listened again, heard them at the same distance and bent to his snowshoe. He tried to get the shortened strap through the buckle and pull it up to another hole, but his fingers could not do it. He was wearing two pairs of socks and thought quickly of taking his boot off, discarding one sock, then lacing the boot tightly again in the hope that the strap would pass over it. But he was doubtful if the difference would be enough and his fingers were already clumsy with cold. He reached into his pocket for his knife and cut away the loose ends of his leather bootlaces. Above him a wolf howled and another answered. The sound was closer now and he reached for his rifle and watched. Nothing moved. Don turned back to his shoe again. He thought: To

heck with them. Let 'em come close if they want and they'll get a load of lead. I've got to fix this strap some-way and fix it good or I'll never get out of here, so I might as well take my time to it.

He doubled the broken strap back on itself to make a loop, pierced the leather carefully with his knife and secured the loop with a short length of lace. He was glad that was done before his fingers were really numb, because the rest was fairly easy; he threaded three lengths of lace through the loop and through the buckle, tightened them and tied them securely as he could. The wolves still howled occasionally. Don squatted on his snowshoes, wedging his gloves between his calves and his thighs to warm them while he warmed his hands against his body, inside his shirt. He wanted his fingers supple and loose for the rifle if the wolves ever gave him a chance.

But they still would not come and he got up at last and started down the slope again. His plan was clear in his mind now. He would draw them down to the floor of the valley, then across and down to the corner of the meadows where he was to meet Tubby and Lee. Perhaps in the meadows they would show themselves. It was a chance anyway. And, Don admitted to himself, it would be mighty good to be with Tubby and Lee—or with anyone at all.

They were still following, almost lazily it seemed from the sound of their voices. As he held on down the hill Don began to doubt his plan; they might give up following—a deer might start suddenly ahead of one

of them and draw the whole pack away or they might simply grow weary of the slow chase. Then he heard a single wolf howl far out to the left and ahead; another answered him from the right and again the sound seemed to come from farther down the hill than Don himself was. For the second time he felt a rush of panic fear in his mind and body. Perhaps they were really hunting to kill him, Don Morgan; perhaps the wolves ahead were trying to turn him, wear him down by miles of travel and close in as they would on a deer; perhaps they meant to circle ahead and wait for him as Lee had said the father of the pack had waited for the deer that crossed the lake. Don tried to force the thought away from him with all his own knowledge of wild animals and the thousand stories he had heard from his uncle and Steve Hardy and Ray and other woodsmen, but he could feel a measure of panic still in himself and see signs of it in what he did. He was traveling too fast and a little clumsily; he was carrying his rifle ready, pointed ahead of him and he was straining his eyes into the timber about him, glancing quickly from side to side and even behind.

He slowed down and allowed himself to look only ahead. He was coming to the floor of the valley now and there was bright moonlight through the trees ahead of him. For a moment he thought he must have come through to the meadows, then knew as soon as he thought about it that he must be fully a mile away from them. But there was a clearing ahead all right, a large clearing, several hundred feet long at least. He came

out to the edge of it and saw that it was even larger than he had thought, a quarter of a mile long and perhaps half as wide. For a moment he stood still, listening. From the opposite side of the valley he heard clearly the hunting of the other wolf pack. Then behind him he heard the howl of his own wolves. He took a step forward and felt the lace in the broken snowshoe harness slip loose on his foot. Calmly he slipped his gloves off and knelt to tie it again. His brain was working steadily and swiftly on a new plan and he had no time for fear.

He tied the lace quickly and easily and started at once across to the far side of the clearing. The snow was brilliantly white in the moonlight and the trees were a broken fringe of deepest black against the sky; the stars were so bright that they stood out against space behind them in spite of the moon's brilliance. Don saw this and felt a sharp pleasure in it. He felt a sudden elation, strong beyond pleasure, in the clearness with which his plan had shaped itself. He was traveling very fast now, almost running on the good crust of the snow. When he was within a hundred feet of the far side of the clearing he swung sharply to his left and followed out the length of the clearing at the same distance from the timber. He went on just into the trees, swung left again and kept on for thirty counted paces. Then he crept out to the edge of the clearing, found himself a place behind a sloping log and waited.

The wolves were still on the hill. Don heard one almost directly above him and another far up the valley.

He wondered how they would come—if they came at all. If they came on his trail and kept coming, the double turn he had made in the clearing would bring them to close range, broadside to his sights and well exposed against the lighted snow. He heard the wolf above him howl again and the sound was answered instantly from the edge of the clearing, near where he had entered it. Don raised his rifle and tested the sights against the snow; the light was good, better than he had dared hope. If they were coming he ought to be able to see them now, crossing the far end of the clearing; he watched closely and saw nothing. A light cold breeze touched his face and he hoped it would hold, however light it might be. He heard the other wolf pack on the far hill, closer now, but his own wolves made no sound. Then he saw them.

They were coming on his trail, half way down the clearing, black shadows, moving slowly. He tried to count them; four, he thought, perhaps five. He wanted to try his sights on them but was afraid to move—if they turned back at that distance he could hope for nothing better than a lucky shot. They came on, steadily and still slowly, in a silence that made him want to hold his breath. He brought the butt of his rifle stealthily against his cheek. He could see them clearly now, huge and dark, shaggy necked and heavy tailed, one following the trail, the others turning out and coming back to it. It was time now. He put the sights on the nearest, led him a little and fired. The wolf somersaulted as Don pumped in a new shell. The

others had stopped, heads held high. Don picked one, sighted for the neck, fired and saw it drop. The others were running for the timber as he fired again and almost as he pressed the trigger he knew he had missed.

Don did not move. His mouth was dry with excitement and his hands were trembling. A wolf howled dismally in the edge of the timber beyond where the dead ones lay. Then the answer came from behind Don and very close. Again he felt panic. His muscles tensed to turn his body, but he held himself rigidly still and watched. The wolf he had dropped first was moving, but he did not fire again. Beyond it, near the edge of the timber, he saw a faint shadow of movement. Then they were coming back, three of them, almost carelessly across the snow, turning and questing, lifting their heads, stopping to howl or sit down, but closing in towards the body of the second wolf. Don picked his chance and fired. A wolf swung round, fell, raised on its forelegs and turned to bite at its haunches. Don drove in a second shot just back of the shoulders. He worked the lever of his rifle, sighted on the next wolf, heard only a click as he pressed the trigger. He felt for new shells and reloaded, keeping his movements smooth and slow as he could. The last two wolves had not run. They were moving restlessly, now back a little along their own trail, now towards one of the dead wolves, now out on the unbroken snow towards Don. Don sighted again and fired. The two wolves held to their movement, without even raising their heads. A wolf dropped to his next shot and the last wolf began

to run. Don fired twice, quickly, and saw him go down. Then he stood up. He took one step forward to go round his log and out into the clearing, stopped and turned sharply round. He knew something was behind him, but at first he could see only the white of snow and the blacks of tree trunks and branches. Then he saw the last wolf, huge and calm and black, sitting on the snow not twenty-five feet away. He lined his sights against a patch of snow, drew them down on the wolf's neck and fired. The wolf flopped over and lay with its feet twitching. Don reloaded and went up to it, saw it was dead and turned away.

The rest of that night was a confusion of action for Don's tired brain and body. He went out across the clearing and shot twice more to finish the wolves he had not killed outright, then he knew only that he wanted to see and talk with someone. He left the clearing and began to hurry down the valley. The wolf pack was still hunting on the far hillside, but he paid no attention to it. The patched harness of his snowshoe broke again and he knelt down, fixed it and went on. Somewhere along the way he realized that the winter was saved, that the rest of the money to buy the *Mallard* was lying up there in the clearing, on the bodies of the dead wolves, but that seemed only a small thing, lost somewhere in the tremendous excitement of what he had done. He wanted to find Jetson and Tubby and he was close to them now, so he quickened his pace still more.

Don had told them he would come to their meeting



Don fired twice, quickly, and saw him go down

place across the meadows, out in the open. He remembered this in spite of his weariness and confused excitement and he passed the beaver dams and held well on down the trail before he turned out on a worn deer path across the meadow. He was nearly halfway across, at the intersection of another deer trail, when he looked up and saw the big buck coming down towards him in the moonlight. It was running, head high, eyes frightened, and it did not see him until he scrambled out of the trail to give it room. It leapt sideways then, suddenly and mightily, and he saw the gleaming black of sweat on its flanks and a white fleck of foam on its shoulders. The first of the wolves was a hundred yards behind. Don dropped on one knee, steadied himself and fired. The wolf tumbled, picked itself up and came on. There was a shot from Don's left and it fell again and lay still. Don looked across and saw Tubby and Jetson against the white meadows. As he watched one of them fired and a wolf yelped. Don saw another wolf for a moment, clearly, broadside on, and he fired again. Then there were no more wolves and he stood up and began to walk to meet Tubby and Jetson as they came towards the wolves they had killed.

"How many?" Don asked.

"Four," Jetson said. "The others pulled out before we had a chance."

"They'll be back," Don said.

Jetson shook his head as he looked down at the dead wolves. "No. The old lady's with them and the old dog too, I guess; these are all cubs. What happened

to the bunch we heard following you out? These aren't them."

"I got 'em," Don said. "In a clearing up the valley—a swamp I guess it was."

"That'd be the little lake. You got 'em all?"

"All I saw. Six."

"Boy," Jetson said. "You sure did the Shifting Valley a good turn tonight. They'd have run every deer out of the place by spring, and most of the other game too."

The wolves were the end of the winter. Wind and clouds came from the south next morning and the day after that there was rain. In cold, heavy spring rain Don and Tubby picked up their traps, in rain and through the slush of melting snow they packed their furs and blankets down to the canoe at the mouth of the canyon. Jetson came with them on the last trip. "Do me good to get out awhile," he told Don. "And I'd as soon see your uncle and talk to him about the mine we've got. From what I've heard of him he's a mighty level-headed man."

At the first opportunity Don went into the settlement to ship the furs. He picked up Tubby on the way and Tubby squatted at once in the back of the wagon to examine the packages. "We going to make it?" he asked. "The *Mallard*, I mean? Because if we aren't you've sure got to take what you need out of my share."

"We'll make it," Don said. "Easy—with the bounties."

As soon as they were rid of the furs Don led the way

to the old sawmill wharf where he knew Phil would have the *Mallard* tied up. But the *Mallard* wasn't there. Don knew she wasn't as soon as he looked, though he searched twice among the collection of boats before he could believe it. "Must have moved," Tubby said. "Likely he'll be up at the cannery again."

They went down on the nearest boat and Don poked his head in the cabin. "Phil Eastey around?" he asked.

It was Drew Mikelson's boat and the old man said: "No, he ain't. Gone to town to get his new boat in shape 'fore the season starts."

"He's what?" Don said.

"Gone to town, I told you. He's bought hisself a Diesel boat."

"What's he done with the *Mallard*?"

"I wouldn't know. I did hear he sold her—guess he'd have to before he could put hands on that new rig."

"Who'd he sell her to?"

"I wouldn't know. I thought you was going to buy her, but I guess Phil couldn't wait."

Don felt tears in his eyes as they went away. "Darn that guy, anyway," he said. "What got into him? He knew I wanted that boat. He could have waited."

"Maybe she's around still," Tubby said. "Maybe he didn't sell her. Old Man Mikelson don't always get things straight."

"He's straight on that," Don said. "The old guy's not so dumb as people say anyway."

They walked the length of the town and searched every wharf for the *Mallard*, but she was not there. Two

or three fishermen confirmed Mikelson's word that Phil had sold her and gone to town, but no one knew who had bought her, though one man did say: "I heard it was a woman."

They drove wretchedly home in the wagon. "There's other boats," Tubby said. "Maybe we've made enough so you can go to town and pick one out down there."

"You won't find another like the *Mallard*," Don said. "Not at the price." He slammed his fist down on the seat between them. "Gee, it makes a guy sore to work all winter for one thing like that and then lose out on it through no fault of his own. You wouldn't think Phil'd do a thing like that."

Tubby came back to the farm with Don. When they walked into the kitchen Uncle Joe and Jetson and Aunt Maud were sitting at the table, talking and laughing. Don crossed the kitchen and slumped down into a chair without saying a word. Uncle Joe asked: "Did you ship your furs all right?"

"Oh, sure."

"What's the trouble?"

"Nothing," Don said.

"The *Mallard*'s gone," Tubby said. "Phil Eastey sold her." Don glared at him; then he heard the others laughing.

"Meet the owner," Uncle Joe said, and Don looked and he was holding his hand out towards Aunt Maud. "Your Aunt Maud sold the electric company stock and bought her. She's tied up down at the mouth of the river now."

Don looked at his aunt in disbelief. "You didn't do that," he said. "There wouldn't be any sense to it."

"I had to," she said.

Don's eyes were angry. He was sitting up straight now, on the edge of the chair. "What for?"

"Because Phil had to sell. They told him he'd have to take up the option on the Diesel boat right away if he wanted her."

"I still don't get it," Don said. "What's Phil's option to you?" He saw she was smiling at him and could not understand the smile.

"Phil came and told me," she said gently. "I had to buy her then, because I knew how badly you wanted her, Don. I had to be sure she was there for you when you came out."

THE END